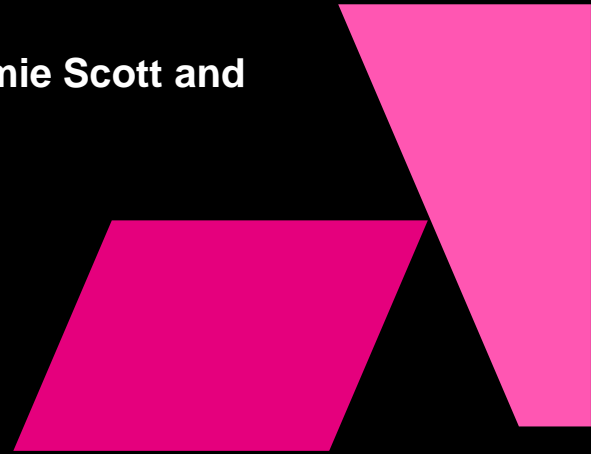# Generation FOMO

Report on Audience Feedback from Pilot/First Performance

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About the Authors

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1. Generation FOMO: The Performance

1.1. The play

Generation FOMO is a new play by Isabelle Defaut, exploring the experiences of young people using social media and the impact on their mental health. This is a verbatim play, created from interviews conducted by Isabelle with primary and secondary school pupils in Kent, as well as students from the University of Kent, about their relationships with their phones and social media and the impact this has on their day to day lives. Isabelle has also included the voices of parents and teachers, highlighting their concerns of navigating this ever changing digital landscape.

Themes include the effects of excessive smartphone use on mental health, fear of missing out, hyper awareness of appearance and judgement by peers, safety online, and also the exposure to material which may be beyond the maturity for a young audience.

1.2. The performances

There were two script in hand performances, featuring eight young and talented actors, reading word for word the views and experiences of over 25 young people (aged 10-27 years) expressed in individual and group interviews with Isabelle. The performance included TikTok dance sequences, and live 'footage' of social media apps like Youtube and TikTok projected behind the actors.

The production was performed to teachers, education professionals, charities and general members of the public, with the aim being to gather initial responses to the material, identify any areas for further development or missing themes. The first performance was in July 2024 at the University of Kent, and the second was in November 2024 in Whitstable, as part of Smartphone Free Childhood Campaign event: Whitstable Unplugged.

The performance lasts about an hour, and in each case was followed by panel discussions, involving Isabelle Defaut, playwright and director, Dr Lindsey Cameron, a psychologist from the University of Kent, and Wendy Robinson from CALM, a clinical psychologist from CAMHS, a local Deputy Headteacher, as well as some of the young actors, who reflected on parallels between the play and their own experiences.

2.   Audience feedback

2.1.   Gathering audience perspectives/feedback

Two methods were used to gather feedback. At one performance, a questionnaire was provided at the end of the performance, asking 30 members of the audience to share their thoughts based on four questions:

- What is the main message you will take away from the play?
- How will you consider your use of smartphone and social media after watching the play?
- Can you think of anything that would help/support you or the young people in your life with the use of a smartphone?
- Do you think hearing young people's perspectives on this issue is important? Why/Why not?

At the other performance, participants were given a blank postcard and were simply asked to provide their feedback on the play.

Respondents also had a chance at the end of the survey to provide additional comments, for example feedback for both the actors and playwright, any further information the viewer felt was important in their response to the play.

2.2   Analysis of feedback

Responses were analysed to determine the impact of the play on: audience understanding of young people's use of smart phones, how the audience's own smart phone use is challenged in response to the play, strengths and areas for future development. The analysis team consisted of one recent school leaver, three emerging adults (undergraduate students) and one academic research specialising in children's social development and peer relations (Dr Lindsey Cameron).

The following themes were identified:

Positive feedback on Gen FOMO
Addiction,
Restriction,
Generational Differences,
Education
Social Media as a reflection of society.

3.   Findings

3.1.   Positive feedback on Gen FOMO

The feedback from the audience at both performances was very positive, and a selection of comments are below. Audience members thought the interviews were powerful, insightful, and provided a new perspective on the issues surrounding young people's use of social media.

"Really powerful performance. We need to get this into schools"

"Fantastic performance, powerful verbatim theatre."

"Very powerful. I loved the play, particularly when the cast mentioned their screen time out loud. I hate seeing how long I've been on a phone and feel shame for it. Well done for such a great show."

"Very informative and deserves to be heard by a wider audience."

"What an important play!"

One audience member also commented that the play benefited from the use of young people's own words, as this communicated with young people on their level, and was less 'preachy'.

"It really spoke to me both as a parent and a teacher. I feel this work has more impact and feels less preachy than traditional lectures and presentations."

Many audience members fed back that they thought the play should be required viewing in schools for a wide ranging audience.

"Should be mandatory viewing in schools etc, for kids and parents."

3.2   Addiction

A strong theme from the audience response to the play is around **addiction**. Many respondents commented on the addictive nature of smartphones and social media, which young people are particularly vulnerable to: the play brought this message home. The audience referred to many ways in which this addiction impacts on young people including their mental health, physical well-being, and self-care including sleep. Audience commented that the greater social media use as a result of the addictive nature of apps e.g. tiktok, and the algorithms which feed particular material to young people,also leads to greater exposure to violence or sexual behaviours online.

"Addiction [of social media] is so normalised and we are very desensitised to things that are really quite traumatic"

The addictive nature of social media was described as being 'exhausting' - that is, it was not an enjoyable pastime, but rather a pull on young people's cognitive and emotional energy, and time.

"Social media seems to be addictive, draining, damaging and too influential"

Responses often mentioned how the addiction and repetitive use of social media led to desensitisation to traumatic and detrimental media - such as pornographic material at a young age as well as prejudiced views presented on social media platforms.

"Addiction is so normalised and we are very desensitised to things that are really quite traumatic."

This is a significant observation as the addictive nature of social media may be due to the algorithms on social media sites such as X - formerly Twitter, TikTok and Instagram, which have very few safety features in place to prevent young people's exposure to harmful content. The algorithm used on social media platforms, especially X and Instagram can also feed excessive damaging content to young people - and once interacted with, more and more appear on a person's social media feed.

3.3 Mental Health

The effects on mental health were highlighted, and specifically concerning the impact of social media on a need to conform to unrealistic societal standards for appearance, damaging self-esteem. Social media was viewed as creating insecurities in young people, as a result of the increased pressure to be liked and match the generational beauty standard. Constant exposure to unrealistic beauty standards and social expectations via social media was thought to deplete a person's ability to cope with societal expectations, was draining and damaging for young people. The play sparked greater concern for and understanding of this issue in the audience

"Dangers of technology and the culture social media creates - mental health and insecurity in oneself and one's social life."

Insecurity in one's social life was an important point raised by the audience, and this is a major message in the play: in addition to creating high expectations on young people in terms of their appearance, viewing the apparent social lives of others on social media, and the constant barrage of posts about parties, get togethers, and also friend tracking can not only create a 'fear of missing out', but also heighten a sense of being left out.

"Dangers of technology and the culture social media creates - mental health and insecurity in oneself and one's social life."

The play was very revealing for the audience, who often did not know the full extent of what it is like to be addicted to phone usage. The audience gained a better understanding of the 'need' to use your phone, in fear of missing out.

"To be honest, I've often wondered what it looks like to be 'addicted' or <u>need</u> your phone. Now I have a much clearer idea!"

The pervasiveness of social media was frequently brought up by the audience. The constant exposure to what is seen on social media can highlight what young people are missing out on. The play demonstrated how pressing of an issue this is to young people and parents.

"Social media plays too big a role in our lives. The sooner we acknowledge this, the sooner we can act upon it."

The play was insightful in that the audience learnt about the pressure young people experience trying to keep up with both the lives of their peers on social media, and current culture and trends, in fear of missing out.

"As a parent you do not realise the pressure that social media brings to children."

3.4 Generational Differences

The play increased older generations' understanding of how different social media is now, even than 10 years ago, and also the specific ways young people in particular are vulnerable to the negative effects of social media. Many members of older generations shared that social media has changed so much even within the last 10 years, that the impact of social media was so much more nuanced and powerful on younger people, than their own age.

"Absolutely - this is the first generation raised on smartphones and I think we are only just beginning to see what that really means."

One particular response discussed how much harder the social expectations are for the younger generation, as younger people often worry about the perception for their persona they present on their social media pages.

"The younger generation have it much harder than us! [...] I would never post something as I feel no one would really care!"

3.5 Restrictions

"Honestly, I want to chuck out my smartphone and get an old Nokia" .

The play clearly communicated the inability of young people to manage their own smartphone use, and the need for restrictions to be imposed on them to help them limit their time on social media platforms. The play then prompted the audience to consider critically their own smartphone use, and potential restrictions that may be helpful in protecting young people from harmful effects of social media, while allowing a certain use of smartphones in a controlled manner.

3.5.1 Need for restrictions as a form of support

A key theme to emerge from the audience feedback, and a key take home message from the play, was the need amongst young people for help in order to effectively manage their smart phone and social media use.

"The play should be shown in the lobby of the House of Commons. These kids' voices are 'the canaries in the coal mine' (early warning sign of danger). They're pleading with us to listen and to act."

3.5.2 Age restriction

Age restrictions in access to social media and smartphones was important to older generations audience members, who suggested that younger people's lives are *"dominated by this stuff [social media], their lives blighted".* Many respondents felt that age restrictions would help support the young people in their lives in dealing with social media more appropriately. Age suggestions ranging from 12-16 years as the earliest point for access, and some suggested limiting access to online content or smartphones altogether until later in life.

One respondent however highlighted how parents are implicit in young people's reliance on smartphones, as they are easy methods of keeping young children occupied. One remarked that it is *"too easy for parents to give children phones to keep them busy"* . Parents may, therefore, also struggle to adhere to a smart phone ban for children.

3.5.3   Location-based restriction

Audience members suggested that limiting phone use to specific areas would be an effective way to limit the effects of phone use for children. This included a phone ban in school, and limiting use to specific locations in the house for dedicated screen time. 6 respondents specifically suggested that phone bans in schools would reduce the negative effects of phone use as it would bring children back to the present moment, being interactive with their peers, and having a healthier lifestyle in real life social interaction.

However the consideration of a location restriction also highlighted the lack of third space access for young people - third spaces being tertiary locations for people to interact and build relationships, i.e. not at home or at school. An additional issue is the lack of welcoming, public spaces for young people that are free to access: most public places for interaction require payment to be allowed there, for example, coffee shops, leisure centres, sports clubs. This makes using online interaction via social media an easy option for young people, as interacting in public spaces is both expensive and difficult to access. Some participants also noted that young people can often face judgement from others when using public spaces.

"An increase of physical 3rd spaces for young people, less judgement towards children using technology [would support young people re use of smartphones]"

3.5.4   Time restriction

Time restriction was also viewed as a key solution to potential smartphone addiction. Respondents often suggested stricter time boundaries (times of day that the phone can be used), self-imposed time limits and notification blockers. Blocking notifications at specific times - i.e. before bed or while doing school work - would help prevent disruption for the young person.

One respondent also made an observation that one way to restrict the negative impact of smartphones is through limiting their access to harmful apps that suck up their time, and instead limit use to specific apps that help us in our lives - that have utility.

"using them [smartphones] only when they prove useful, or apps that don't negatively affect me e.g. notes, weather, music, clock."

One way of achieving this could be through the use of *"an old Nokia"* which would provide functionality but limit exposure to social media platforms.

3.5.5   The role of social media companies

The responsibility of companies that provide social media apps to young people in minimising the negative impact of these apps, was highlighted by some audience members, though most did focus on local restrictions enforced by parents/carers (e,g, setting up notification blockers) and schools (banning phones).

One respondent thought *"restrictions to online companies providing social media apps"* was essential to mitigate the negative effects of social media use on young people. For example, providing strict time limits based on the age of the individual using the social media website, or limiting the features that people can access based on their age. While such limits would be effective, they would reduce companies ability to maximise profit from young users - therefore may have to be government mandated for correct implementation.

3.6   Parents

Parents are vital in supporting young people to limit their smartphone use/social media use, but audience members reported they need up to date knowledge to adequately support young people. The potential influence of parents as role models was also stressed, as well as the importance of open and frank conversations about the issues raised in the play is essential to mitigate the negative impact of excessive social media/smartphone use.

3.6.1   Parents need to be informed:

"Brilliant. Lots of this is new to me."

The play provided vital new information for many parent audience members. This understanding is vital in order to practically support young people in limiting their social media use. One example was Snapmaps, which, according to young people interviewed for the play, played a significant role in generating FOMO. The play not only taught parents about these features, but brought them to life for the audience by showing in real-time how young people use these features and how they impact them psychologically. For instance, one parent reported they had never heard of Snap Maps as a feature of Snapchat.

"Snapmaps!! WTF! Didn't know it existed! Terrifying. As a parent, I need to understand more, what's out there in terms of social media"

"Very informative - more than I have heard from school :-)"

Open conversations: One parent suggested that *"having open and honest conversations about what was shared [in the play] is important - support for parents and where to start can be a barrier. More practical resources [would aid in this]"*. This educational support for parents would help prepare them for social media and its uses that can adversely affect young people - preventing potential mental health struggles for their children. Implementation of this to early schooling - i.e. at the start of secondary school - may be the best opportunity to teach parents about the effects of social media, with yearly meetings to further explain the changes made to social media.

"This is a fantastic play that will open up a conversation about phone use and social media in our Family"

Role modelling: One parent suggested *"role modelling safe phone use with their own children"* is important. But many parents would find this, as well as open conversations with their young people, challenging. This underlines the importance of other, complementary approaches e.g. restrictions.

Respondents highlighted that educating parents on the issues of social media use could lead to more open dialogue within families, allowing for discouraging young people to engage so heavily with social media. Additionally, providing support for young people when changing their social media habits was a common response - emphasising the support for behaviour change.

"Having open conversations with adults and guardians about what you use and how long for - being educated on both ends about how to be safe and take care of yourself."

3.7   Education of young people and parents/educators via Generation FOMO play

"The play bridges gaps in audience members' understanding."

One respondent suggested that social media usage and addiction can be best curbed by *"Visiting schools. Doing workshops [with young people]."* By implementing programmes in school time, students can be educated on healthy habits in relation to social media use and screen time - as well as dangerous activities that can occur online.

In attempting to educate young people as well as school staff, many respondents suggested that sharing the Generation FOMO project and showing the play in schools will help educate them on the risks of social media.

"It is important to hear the pressure young people are under"

"The issues [highlighted by the play] for me seem to be things that already exist in society: Sexism, addiction, consent etc- those things need teaching and educating to filter through the use of technology. Education is the key to everything …"

This audience member believed the root of the issues with social media exposure lies in a lack of education on issues like sexism, consent, addiction, and pornography. That is, lack of education on real-world issues which affects how they respond to information they see online, and in the real world. has seen itself reflected in the social media that young people access on a daily basis.

Audience members felt that Generation FOMO could improve education on the effects of social media use, and that by being rooted in the real voices and experiences of young people, Generation FOMO could mitigate negative experiences with online media - minimising the struggles of mental health from young people.

"I consider it a great way to raise awareness. Real stories from real people always have a greater impact."

"We need to hear this so much - Please carry on !!!!"

"Hugely important to hear from young people directly on this."

"Absolutely. It's vital to have the views of young people. We need to listen to them, hear them, and understand the impact."

A number of audience members, particularly in the second performance where there were more parents of primary school-aged children, thought the play could and should be adapted for primary schools, to catch young people before they get phones.

"Would love to see it in primary schools"

"Definitely take this to schools, also primary."

"I think it would be good if something like this could be designed for kids, without the hard stuff, as I think for some of them it would make it easier to understand without causing much of a drama"

Part of the motivation for this was that by the time we get to teenage years, it is too late to address smart phone use: it is primary school parents who need to be reached before they allow their child access to their own phone. This will prevent future problems.

"It's more difficult to put the genie back into the bottle. By the time children have reached year 7, they know all too well about the dangers of smartphones. We need to be reaching the parents of children in primary schools so they understand what could happen to their children if they give their children smartphones in yers 3, 4 or 5"

Respondents also felt the play should be rolled out to a wider audience, reaching parents and teachers as well as children, in primary and secondary schools.

"Performances in primary schools for parents either morning or evening."

"It needs to be seen by parents and teachers of primary school children"

"This needs to be shown in all schools"

3.8 Negative impact on attention span

"… Addiction/attention span….Comparison to boredom/laziness."

An important theme in the play is smartphone use is driven by boredom: while social media platforms can drag young people's attention away from immediate and fulfilling tasks/activities in the real world, it is also the case that even a few seconds of unoccupied time leads to immediate phone use. This is a habit that young people find they cannot break. Related to this, is the reduction in young people's attention span as a result of the nature of social media platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram's Reels feature. This has reduced the consumption of long-

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form media, and could make attending lectures and classes in educational settings more difficult for extended periods of time.

"I still need to acknowledge that most of the time I'm on my phone it's for no reason."

3.9 Schools are only one source of influence

One audience member commented that schools are limited in the time and resources available to address this issue. This underlines the important point that schools are in fact just one source of influence, along side parents and peers, and the need for expert input, like plays such as Gen FOMO, which can provide high quality and impactful experiences with minimal impact on teachers time, and can be delivered to senior leaders within school who will cascade information to the rest of the team.

"we have to understand that schools can't solve all of the issues re. social media. I will certainly now take some social media off my own phone. I train teachers and will take this experience to SLT (senior leadership team) to see if we can have the play performed to the trainees."

4. Benefits of social media

In contrast, some respondents also emphasised the importance of social media with its role of providing a space for young people to socialise and engage with others who are like-minded - especially if members of those groups are not present in their local community.

"Young people often don't want to listen to [adults], we become white noise. Because many young people use social media to engage with communities of support - this needs to be considered [when discussing smartphone use]."

This response outlines the key benefits for young people when using social media, as many minority groups find their communities online through social media applications such as Discord, TikTok or Youtube, where groups of like-minded people can interact with each other. This is especially important when considering young LGBTQ+ individuals who may be in areas with minimal support for their identities - being in school or at home - who can feel accepted in online spaces and communities.

The use of online resources as well has a major positive impact on young people. By having access to mental health support online, young people can have aid in improving their mental health as well as seeing other people who have survived mental health struggle as role models. These exemplify the beneficial side of social media as a communicative tool for young people. Audience members recommended this is built into the play.

5.   Importance of hearing young people's experiences and views

"They are living it, and we need to understand it."

Audience members were asked: 'Do you think hearing young people's perspectives on this issue is important? Why?' An overwhelming majority of respondents were passionate about the importance of hearing young people's perspectives on the issue of social media use. Responses from older generations highlighted how their lack of knowledge made the input of young people even more important to help them understand the effects of social media.

One respondent reported: *"I think that it [young people's] is the most important perspective."*

Younger respondents agreed that listening to young people's perspectives on social media use is important, underlining the importance of plays such as Generation FOMO that showcase the stories from young people so that their voice is heard.

"I think it is really important because no one listens to us"

One response also highlighted how useful the Q&A/panel discussion was at the end of the play which allowed them to hear first hand different perspectives on young people's relationship to social media, and the importance of working together to address this issue.

"Listening to the Q&A has really brought to light how important it is for parents, adults and educators to see and hear this work. We could all work together to change this issue"

6.   What is the main message you will take away from the play?

"How damaging social media is to all of us."

"young people are much more aware of the problem [than I thought]"

A number of common themes emerged, in terms of what audience members will take away from the play, including:

- Increased understanding of how young people are impacted by social media
- Increase in knowledge of the risks of social media and technology
- Better understanding of the culture social media creates.
- The role that social media takes in their own life and how it impacts them
- Realise the extent of the pressure that social media has on young people
- New understanding of the change in dynamic of social interaction in the social media, and how it generates FOMO.
- A new understanding of just how much young people are aware of the problem but lack the skills to deal with it effectively.

7.   How will you consider your use of smartphone and social media after watching the play?

7.1.   Immediate Change in smartphone use:

One extreme positive from the play was the resounding response for a change in the audience's behaviour after watching the play. Many respondents shared how they will change their behaviours based on their understanding of the play. Both younger and older respondents said that they would try to limit their social media use, whilst parents also proposed changed methods for phone use in their homes.

*"I will try to reduce my time and break the cycle of addiction."*

"Definitely, I will reduce my screen time and consider finding alternative activities."

"I will attempt to stop dual screening when watching TV/films. I immediately increased my son's restrictions when the play finished."

"I don't use social media but I'm still aware of its pull. In particular, it made me think about the behaviour I model for my own children."

"I need to model appropriate phone use more."

Many respondents reported they intended to be more mindful of their smartphone use, and be more *"conscious of [their] own usage"*. Many respondents said they will attempt to model better behaviour for others in their life, cutting back on their excessive social media usage; whilst young respondents highlighted specific apps that they will be limiting themselves on such as TikTok and Instagram. Other respondents also mentioned going *"cold turkey on Twitter"* after the *[2024 UK General]* election, illustrating how external influences can have an impact on the usage of social media and smartphone technology.
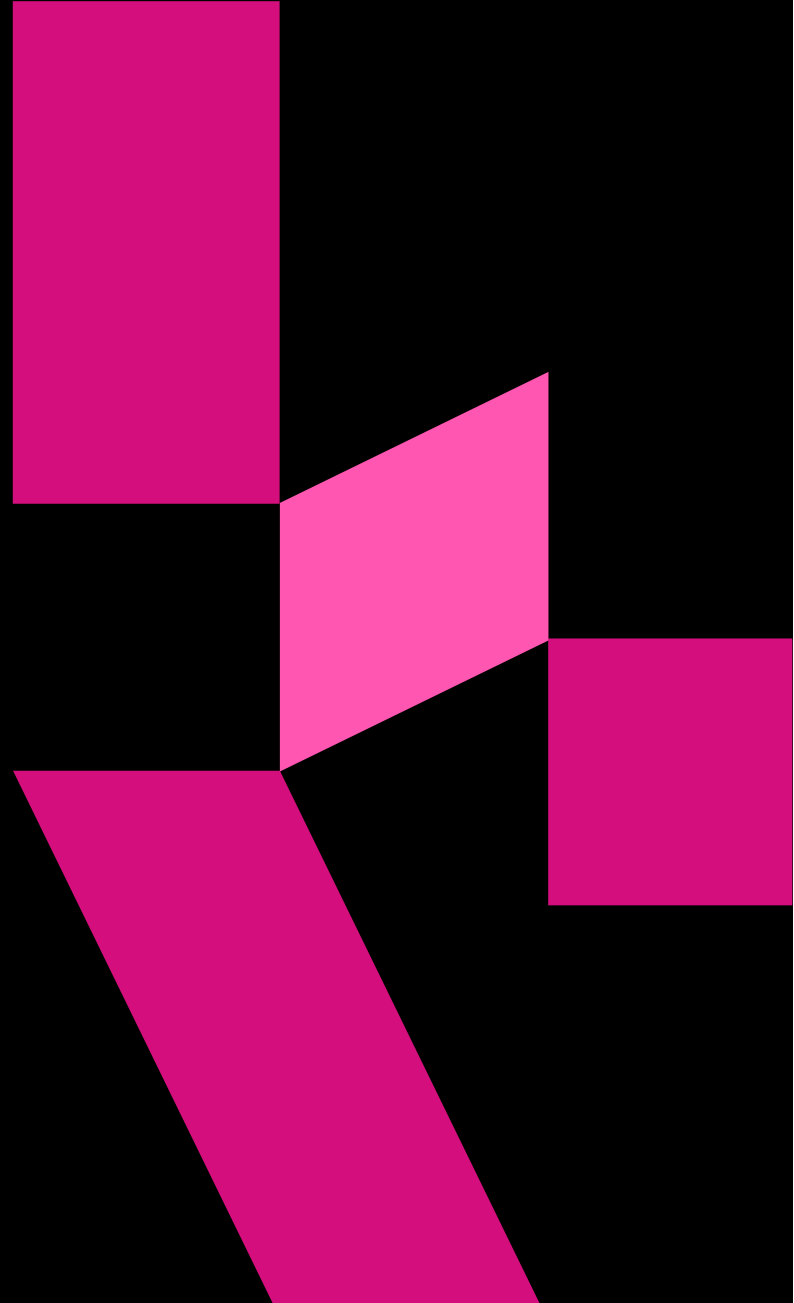
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