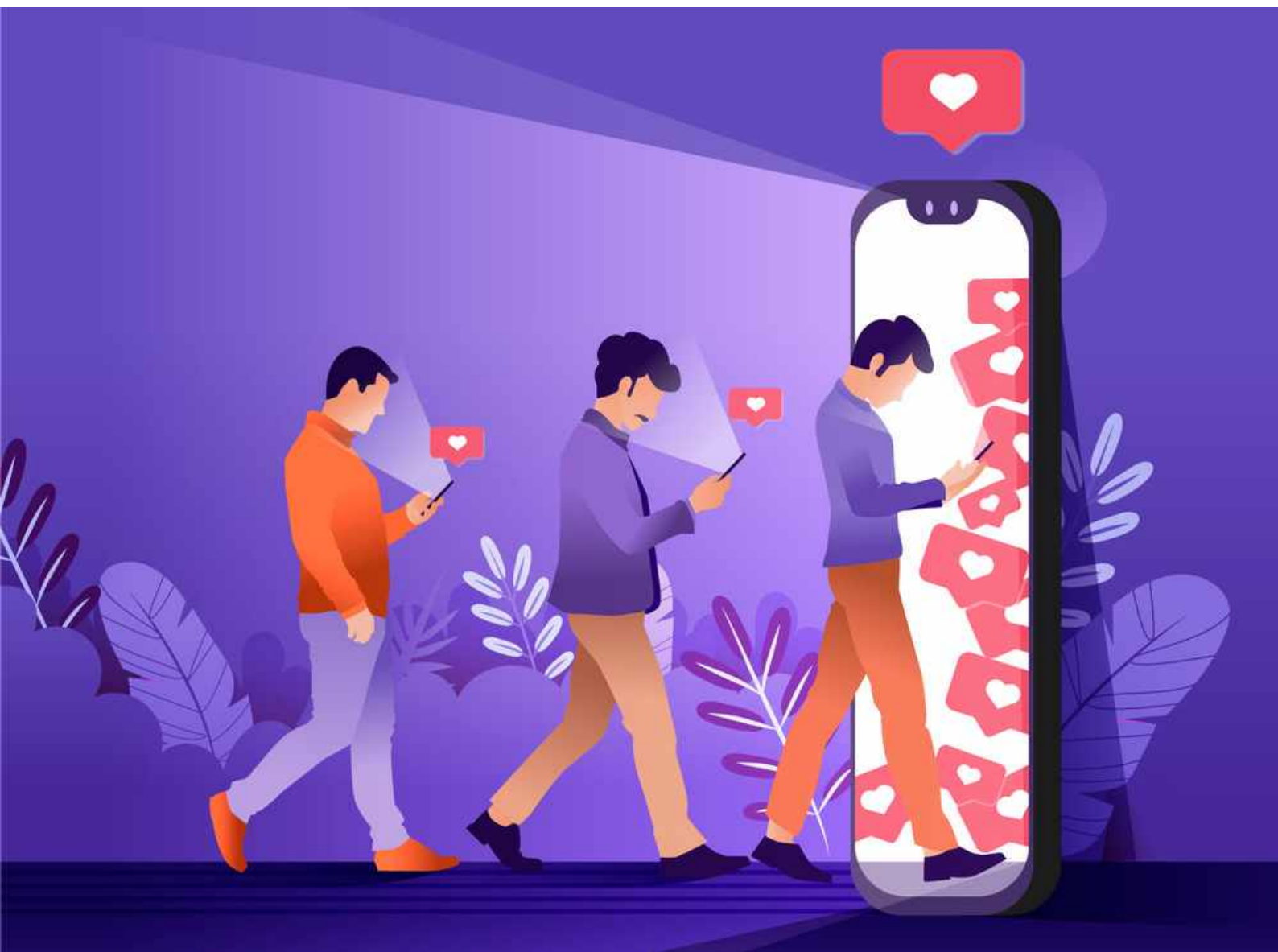


# A guide to **DISCOVERING REEL VERSUS REAL**



ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving  
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students





about

# DISCOVERING REEL VS REAL

**Have you ever opened your phone just to check one message... and suddenly, it is 45 minutes later and you have watched countless reels, seen what everyone had for lunch, and somehow ended up on a random meme page?** This has happened with so many of us.

Social media plays a big role in how we live, connect, and even understand the world. Apps like Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube have become more than just platforms- they are places where we laugh, learn, get inspired, stay connected, and sometimes... feel overwhelmed, left out, or not good enough. It can be fun, but it can also mess with our emotions and attention without us even realizing it.



Why is this guide here? To help you figure out what is real, what is not, and how to use social media in a way that actually helps you- not stresses you out. We will talk about how to use it in healthy ways, how to spot the difference between “reel” and real life, how to avoid the comparison trap, and how to take care of your mental health in the digital age.

**This is not about quitting social media. It is about understanding it better- so you stay in control of your screen time instead of letting it control you.**

## What is Social Media?

Social media is like a huge digital playground where people come to share parts of their lives, showcase their talents, follow trends, express opinions, and stay connected. Platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and WhatsApp are some of the most popular ones. As students, you may be using social media to chat with friends, watch funny videos, express yourselves, learn new things, post updates, or keep up with what is happening in the world.

### Social Media Mood Board

Create a collage- digital or physical- that captures how social media makes you feel. Use emojis, colors, magazine cut-outs, doodles, and words. Then reflect: What feelings come up the most? Are they mostly positive or negative? Make a note of your reflections here:

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## The Role of Social Media in Daily Life

Think about your day- from the moment you wake up to when you go to bed. How many times do you check your phone? Social media has become woven into our daily routines. Whether we scroll while eating breakfast, check notifications during a school break, or watch videos before bed, social media is always there.

It is not just a tool anymore; for many, it is a habit or even a lifestyle. But this constant connectivity can lead to stress, fatigue, or distraction if not managed well.



### The Role of Social Media in Daily Life

Draw a clock and mark the times you check social media in a day. Ask yourself: What else could I do during that time? Could I rest, talk to someone, read, or be creative instead?

What might I be missing out on during this time?

## The “Reel vs Real” Effect

Social media is filled with beautiful pictures, perfect moments, and exciting lives- but what we see is often edited, staged, or only a small slice of the full story. This is the "reel" version, like the highlights in a movie trailer.

The "real" version might include the bad days, the arguments, the unfiltered face, or the boredom- things not usually shown online. For example, think of a time when you saw someone have a perfect day at a beach- did they mention the discomfort they felt in the hot sun, the boredom, or bug bites? That is the "reel." What we see online is often edited, filtered, cropped, and staged- it may be part of the truth, but not the whole picture.

Understanding the difference between what people post and what they actually experience can help us avoid unrealistic comparisons and feel better about our own lives.

## Positives of Social Media

Social media has multiple positive outcomes! In fact, when used thoughtfully, it can offer great benefits:



**Learning new skills:** Whether it is learning how to bake a cake, speak a new language, play an instrument, code, or create digital art, platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are full of step-by-step tutorials and skill-sharing creators.

**Staying connected:** Especially for those with family or friends who live far away, social media helps bridge distances. It allows for instant communication, shared memories, and emotional support, even across difficult time zones.



**Building communities:** From mental health support groups to fandom pages, book clubs, and gaming squads- social media allows people with shared interests to find one another and create a sense of belonging.



**Raising awareness:** Social media can be a platform for social change. You can learn about environmental causes, mental health campaigns, or social justice movements and share those messages to inspire others. It can help you stay connected with causes that you care about, and even provides a platform to express your views and concerns.

**Expressing creativity:** Many people use social media as a canvas to express their ideas, humor, emotions, and art. Whether it is dance moves in reels, poetry, vlogs, animations, or art- you have a voice and a platform.



**Feeling inspired:** It provides us with positive and motivational stories, acts of kindness, and informative videos that can uplift and energize us. They remind us of the good in the world and in ourselves.

### Social Media Superpower

Imagine you are a superhero who uses social media to make the world better. What kind of content do you post? What is your mission and motto? Design your own profile page!



## Did You Know?

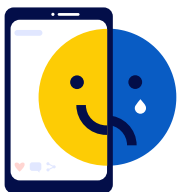
Social media is not just for trends- it helps raise voices and create change. Here are a few real examples:

- **#FridaysForFuture:** Started by teenager Greta Thunberg, this climate change movement grew globally through Instagram and Twitter, inspiring students worldwide to care about the planet.
- **#BlackLivesMatter:** A powerful hashtag that turned into a global civil rights movement, encouraging conversations about racism, justice, and equality.
- **#ShareTheMeal:** A UN campaign where people donated meals with a single tap- shared widely on Instagram, it helped feed children in need.
- **Mental Health Awareness:** Pages like @the\_happy\_broadcast and @seize.the.awkward use art and conversation starters to normalize mental health struggles and support.
- **#KindnessMatters:** A viral hashtag where people posted small acts of kindness, creating a ripple effect of positivity across platforms.

These movements show that your voice matters online. When used with care, social media can spread hope, raise awareness, and make a real difference in the world.

## Negatives of Social Media

While there are positives, social media can also present challenges:



It can make you feel left out or not good enough, especially when others seem to be having more fun or leading more successful lives.

Exposure to harmful, violent, or inappropriate content can negatively affect your thoughts and feelings.

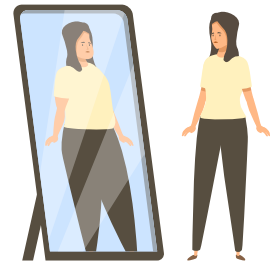


You may find yourself chasing likes or views, which can create an unhealthy sense of validation.



Spending too much time online might take away from real-life relationships or hobbies.

Seeing unrealistic beauty standards can hurt your self-esteem or body image.



Using screens late at night can disturb your sleep and leave you feeling tired or distracted the next day.

Being aware of these effects is the first step to using social media more mindfully and protectively.

## Common Pitfalls with Social Media

Though social media has multiple benefits, there are some common phenomena with social media that most of us have experienced at some point of time. The purpose of this section is to create awareness about these processes, such that it can help you stay connected with others via digital platforms in a mindful and healthy manner. Here are some of the common places where we might get stuck:



### ① The Comparison Trap:

Constant comparison with other people's updates leading to anxiety or feelings of low self-worth — be it witnessing their good grades, achievements, vacations or even quality time with their family.

But remember: everyone has struggles, and most people only share their best moments online. Your journey is unique, and your value is not defined by someone else's timeline!

## "Me vs Me" Journal



Write about how you have grown or improved in the last year- in school, friendships, hobbies, or even emotionally. Focus on your personal progress.

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### 2 Social Media Burnout:

It happens when we overload our brains with information, comparison, and constant stimulation. Signs include feeling tired, anxious, irritated, or just numb. It is important to take digital breaks to recharge and reconnect with real life.



#### Self-Check

- Do I feel better or worse after using social media?

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- Do I use it even when I do not want to?

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- Am I ignoring real life for screen time?

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### Burnout Thermometer

On the thermometer shown below, label zones like Cool (calm), Warm (engaged), Hot (overwhelmed), Burnt (numb). Mark where you land after 30 minutes of scrolling.



### 3 Mental Health Effects:

Social media can influence your emotions, thoughts, and mental health. Studies show that too much time online can increase:



But it can also provide support if you follow positive pages, connect with supportive friends, or find resources for mental well-being.

### 4 Addiction

Social media is designed to keep us engaged with likes, shares, and endless scrolling. This is because the algorithm is designed to show you more and more of the content that you like to watch or engage with. Over time, it can become addictive, leading us to use it even when we do not want to. That is why setting healthy limits is crucial.

#### Challenge: Tech-Free Time



Pick one hour each day to go offline completely. Do something you enjoy- read, draw, chat, play. Write down how you felt before, during, and after.

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## 5 Misinformation

Not everything we see online is true. Photos can be edited, news can be fake, and quotes can be made up. Misinformation spreads quickly and can cause fear or confusion.

### Fact Check Checklist

- Who posted it? Are they trustworthy?
- Is it from a reliable source?
- Can you find it on other trusted sites?
- Is it an old image being reused?



## 6 Cyberbullying:

Cyberbullying includes mean messages, spreading rumors, excluding others, or impersonating people online. It can hurt just as much as face-to-face bullying and leave lasting emotional scars.

### Did You Know?



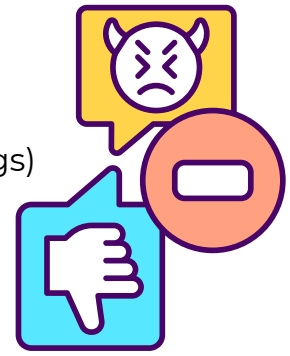
Cyberbullying comes in many harmful forms:

- **Flaming & harassment:** Arguments or repeated cruel messages that use hurtful, offensive, or threatening language.
- **Cyberstalking:** Intense and ongoing online harassment that causes fear and can spill into real-life safety concerns.
- **Denigration:** Spreading lies or rumors online to damage someone's reputation or relationships.
- **Impersonation:** Pretending to be someone else to post harmful content or cause them trouble, often through fake accounts.
- **Outing & trickery:** Sharing someone's private or embarrassing information without consent- or tricking them into revealing it first.
- **Online grooming:** When an adult builds a relationship with a minor online to gain trust and later exploit them.
- **Exclusion:** Deliberately leaving someone out of online groups or chats, making them feel unwanted or isolated.

*Sometimes others are involved too- bullies might ask friends to join in, or manipulate the victim into reacting so they can get them in trouble. It is important to recognize these patterns and reach out for support if you or someone you know is affected.*

## If you witness or experience cyberbullying:

- Do not engage. Block and report the person
- Keep evidence (screenshots, shared media and/or recordings)
- Talk to a trusted adult or school counselor
- Speak up for someone facing cyberbullying
- Practice kindness online



## Strategies for Healthy Consumption

When social media is so intertwined with our lives and deeply rooted in our routine, is it even possible to stop using it? Maybe not, but there are plenty of ways to manage how we use social media platforms and create a foundation for healthy consumption of online content.

Here are some things you can try:



**Set time limits:** Use screen time tools that are in-built in most smartphones. It helps to remind us of the time we have spent online already.

**Mute or unfollow:** You are free to mute or unfollow anyone who makes you feel less-than or hurts you behind the anonymity of digital media.



**Create, do not just scroll:** Post your own art, writing, or ideas, or use inspirational pages or creators to get inspired.

### Take regular breaks and prioritise real life experiences:

Real life refreshes your brain. It is easy to forget that some of the best moments happen off screen. It is in those unfolding moments of life that we create our most meaningful and cherished memories. Spend time with people you care about, explore nature, learn a new hobby, or simply enjoy quiet time.



**Keep real friends close:** Online friends are great, but in-person bonds can build deeper trust and lasting connection. So make time to go out, and meet people face-to-face.

## Mindfully Consuming Positive Information:

Follow pages that make you feel inspired, informed, and encouraged. This includes:

- Mental health advocates
- Body-positive creators
- Educational accounts
- Artists and creatives



## Setting Boundaries:

Boundaries help protect your time and energy. Examples:

- No phones at the dinner table
- Turning off notifications at night
- Using social media only after homework
- Designating screen-free hours

### Feed Audit

Scroll your feed and ask:

- Does this make me feel good?
- Is it inspiring or draining?
- What can I unfollow today?



### Unposted Moments Album

Write or draw 3 beautiful moments from your week that you did not post. How did they make you feel? Why did you keep them to yourself?

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# Positive Toolkit: Using Social Media the Healthy Way

Use these simple steps to build a better relationship with social media.

## 1. Limit Time

- Set daily app limits.
- Take short breaks (e.g., no scrolling during meals or before bed).

**Try This:** “My daily screen-time goal is \_\_\_\_\_ minutes.”

## 2. Clean Your Feed

- Follow people who uplift you.
- Mute/unfollow accounts that make you feel bad.

**Reflect:** “An account that makes me feel good is \_\_\_\_\_.”

## 3. Pause + Ask “Why?”

- Before scrolling, ask: “Am I bored? Avoiding something? Actually interested?”

**Quick Check:** “What do I need right now instead of scrolling?”

## 4. Set Digital Boundaries

- No phones during study, meals, or sleep time.
- Try one “no screen” hour daily.

**Challenge:** “My screen-free time will be \_\_\_\_\_.”

## 5. Fact-Check Before You Share

- Do not believe or forward everything you see.
- Use reliable sources to check info.

**Tip:** Think before you click “send.”

## 6. Choose Real Life, Too

- Spend time with friends offline.
- Do something fun without screens every day.

**Try This:** “Today I will do \_\_\_\_\_ without my phone.”

## 7. Follow Netiquette

- Be kind, just like in real life.
- Do not post anything you would not say face-to-face.
- Respect others’ privacy.
- No sharing or forwarding without permission.

**Golden Rule:** Think twice, post once.

## 8. Use With Purpose

- Scroll with intention- not just out of habit.
- Create more than you consume.

**Prompt:** “Today, I will use social media to \_\_\_\_\_.”

## 9. Take Breaks

- Try a weekend detox or one offline day a week.
- Notice how you feel after.

**Reflect:** “After a break, I felt \_\_\_\_\_.”

## 10. Do not Compare

Ask yourself:

“When I compare myself to others online, how does it make me feel- and is that feeling based on facts or assumptions?”

“What is something I am proud of in my own journey, even if it is not on social media?”



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