

Promoting  
Resilience in  
Teen Girls' Use  
of Social Media  
The Female Lead  
& Dr Terri Apter

EXECUTIVE  
SUMMARY  
2023

**DISRUPT  
YOUR  
FEED**



# Disrupt Your Feed

## OUR MISSION

The Female Lead has a focused mission: to help girls build self-belief and ultimately self-confidence. We know that 'you can't be what you can't see' so we provide positive role models for girls (and boys) to inspire them, sharing their diverse and engaging stories about success and failure and how to stimulate ideas and passion for what you want to achieve in life. The Female Lead is also committed to improving the social and cultural environments for teen girls, and this inevitably includes social media.

The **Disrupt Your Feed** project was designed to:

- explore how teen girls can learn to resist the negative pull of social media and use it as a force for good.
- show the steps parents and teachers can take to promote healthy social media use.
- provide evidence for regulatory control and government policy.
- offer social media platforms easy ways to improve safe and healthy engagement.

“ We want to protect girls' feelings of self-worth and stimulate lasting confidence

Edwina Dunn  
Founder of The Female Lead ”

“ I believe in disrupting your feed and doing it often

Megan Crabbe  
Influencer, author, activist ”



# Disrupt Your Feed

## THE CHALLENGE

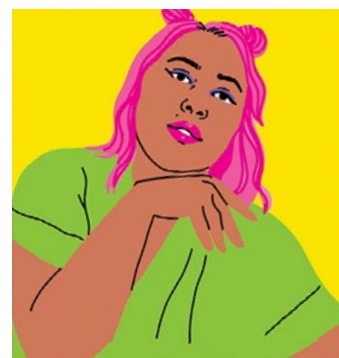
The Female Lead's Disrupt Your Feed project began in 2017 with a stand-out insight from our audience by data science company Starcount –

**'Teen girls who follow inspirational female role models on social media display a more positive and aspirational self-image than their peers.'**

Starcount's research, which analysed thousands of the social media accounts of UK teens, found that teenage girls who chose to follow the social media accounts of the diverse collection of female role models featured in The Female Lead's books and films displayed different traits to the majority of teenage girls in the UK. The results indicated a strong correlation between following female role models on social media and having a stronger, more positive sense of self and a healthier relationship to social media.

In 2018, The Female Lead and Psychologist Dr Terri Apter, Fellow Emerita of Newnham College, University of Cambridge teamed up to explore whether this was a causal or correlative relationship with a year-long qualitative study in 5 schools across the UK. And the results were significant – our 2018/19 (DYF1) intervention showed that;

**'By offering teen girls a diverse range of female role models to follow, aligned with personal interests and career aspirations, it positively impacted their experience of and reaction to social media.'**



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## THE IMPACT

In 2022/23 (DYF2) the team reunited to explore whether or not the positive impact of Disrupt Your Feed (2018/2019) was lasting or short lived.

**Dr Terri Apter recorded a lasting impact. Participants called Disrupt Your Feed ‘transformative’.**

Participants from the original project described a lasting impact on their relationship with social media. Three specific outcomes continued long after the intervention ceased.

- 1** Participants became more aware of how social media was affecting their mood and, as a result, were more careful users.
- 2** The effect was long lasting but was tied to the specific social media platforms upon which they had applied Disrupt Your Feed (the intervention).
- 3** Their career goals became more aspirational.
- 4** They were using social media less overall.

“ It’s time to stop talking about the problem, and start talking about the change.

Edwina Dunn  
Founder of The Female Lead ”

“ We’ve proved the intervention is long-lasting

Dr Terri Apter  
Psychologist and author ”

**Role models continue to make a measurable, positive contribution to teen social media consumption.**

- 1** Results replicated what Dr Apter found in 2018/19.
- 2** Those in the role model group for DYF2 experienced positive effects very similar to those in DYF1
- 3** Participants reported that following new role model suggestions from The Female Lead had expanded or reinforced their interest and aspirations.

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## THE CHALLENGE PERSISTS

STARCOUNT

### Starcourt's 2023 analysis of 3 million teen social media accounts highlights the need to offer diverse role models

- 1** Starcount re-ran the original 2018 trends data and surfaced similar findings in 2023
- 2** The behaviour of teen boys and teen girls still varies significantly:
  - a.** Boys are more likely to follow varied accounts that reflect their passions including gaming and sports.
  - b.** The fastest growing interest sector for boys is Crypto which demonstrates active engagement with finance and enhancing their future prospects
  - c.** Girls are more likely to follow celebrity, reality TV and gossip sites.
  - d.** Girls primarily follow influencers, rather than boys more diverse mix of information sites, media, organisations and brands.
- 3** Teen girls that follow Female Lead role models exhibit different behaviours demonstrating active engagement with their future career prospects – although the diversity of paths represented is limited to the spheres of modelling, talent management and influencers.

“ You can't solve the problem unless you understand it. For that you need evidence of change

Rowena Humby  
Starcourt, CEO



# Disrupt Your Feed

## THE OPPORTUNITY

**In 2023, the representation of idealised bodies/lives on social media are better understood in context.**

- 1** The most striking difference between participants in DYF1 and DYF2 was the different emphasis on idealized and sexual models.
- 2** In the DYF1 cohort, feelings of not measuring up to idealized images presented on social media was a major theme. In DYF2 it was more muted and when it arose there were factors other than social media that re-enforced it.
- 3** Participants were more savvy to the manipulation of images and the fact that what was presented did not reflect reality.

**Participants now understand the value of curating an inspirational feed.**

- 1** Participants in DYF2 social media readily 'take the lead in their own feed' and seek out inspirational models without further intervention.
- 2** The Female Lead recent interventions are now described as introducing them to additional, missed or unexpected profiles that resonated and expand their interests.



We asked our community of over **56,000** people:

- **94%** believe that social media platforms and or the government should do more to protect young people from extreme or harmful content online.
- **84%** of people have made a conscious effort to develop better/healthier social media habits

Despite this..

- **93%** find that they spend much longer than they previously planned passively scrolling on social media

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## THE DIVIDE

**The need for social media self-control has become the accepted norm – but it's a struggle.**

**In each of the three groups in DYF2, teen girls;**

- 1** Demonstrated proactive efforts to manage their social media feed.
- 2** Distinguished between passive use of social media, scrolling through content 'mindlessly' and active use searching for posts that feed their interests.
- 3** Passive scrolling was associated with more negative emotions and left them feeling 'bad because I wasted so much time' and 'uneasy, kind of weird'.
- 4** More active pursuits expanded their interests and lifted their spirits about their schoolwork.
- 5** Demonstrated awareness of how their more positive use of social media influenced the algorithms that governed their feed.
- 6** Noticed that they could influence their feed by dismissing some threads or profiles using the 'this doesn't interest me' option.
- 7** Reported struggling to gain control over social media usage and expressed anxiety about their lack of power.
- 8** Time management posed a huge challenge with girls citing TikTok as the most 'addictive' or time-wasting force.
- 9** Had deleted the TikTok app either for a time, or permanently: 'You start scrolling and suddenly it's four hours later.'
- 10** Reported varied measures to regulate their time use e.g. putting their phone in a parent's room or deleting the app in key study periods before exams.
- 11** Wanted to balance wasting time whilst not missing out on the social currency of the latest social media trends.

“Young people are incredibly influenced by social media.

Domenique Fragale  
Actor, Diana Award  
Ambassador, Mental Health  
Campaigner



# Disrupt Your Feed

## THE CAMPAIGN

The Disrupt Your Feed's March 2023 campaign proves unequivocally that the introduction of Role Models to girls, at formative ages, is both an antidote to social media toxicity and an uplifting and lasting force for good building mental health and self-confidence. Seeing really is Believing.

With this ground-breaking longitudinal research, The Female Lead feels renewed urgency in bringing its books and films of Role Models to more schools and colleges across the UK and USA. Schools don't always have access to teaching resources which reflect diversity and female achievement. The Campaign has already funded thousands of copies reaching millions of young students and we see the impact of these every day.

The Female Lead marks International Women's Day by launching a national book donation campaign and actively seeking partners to help raise the profile of our new pledge #DisruptYourFeed pledge and some support for distributing another 5,000 books (to reach a minimum of 2.6 million students).

You can find out more and read the academic report in full at:

<https://www.thefemalelead.com/disrupt-your-feed>



### #DisruptYourFeed pledge:

- 1 scroll with purpose
- 2 challenge the algorithm
- 3 take the lead in your own feed

“ The world has placed unconscionable pressures on our youngsters.

Jane Hoffman  
Fellow, Harvard University,  
Author, "Your Data,  
Their Billions" ”



# Disrupt Your Feed

## TAKING ACTION

**What can teens do?** - encourage positive mental health online by sharing our Disrupt Your Feed pledge (launching on 6th March 2023) and engaging with positive role models. Discover role model inspiration via our curated list:

<https://www.society.thefemalelead.com/role-models>

**What can schools/teachers do?** - sign up to our school society programme to receive Female Lead books, films and resources at: [www.society.thefemalelead.com/sign-up](http://www.society.thefemalelead.com/sign-up)

**What can parents do?** – buy The Female Lead’s latest book for your children (with over 60 role models to read about) and encourage your teens to disrupt their feed by following inspirational role models online. You can find fresh ideas and suggestions on The Female Lead’s newly updated recommended influencer list at:

<https://www.society.thefemalelead.com/role-models>

**What can organisations/businesses do?** – buy 50+ books for schools across the country (or in their community). We will provide these schools and students with all the necessary materials to run a full Female Lead Society, changing the lives of hundreds of young people. Find out more here:

<https://www.business.thefemalelead.com/>



# Disrupt Your Feed

“ By working with Dr Apter over the last 5 years and through collecting the stories of girls, we (The Female Lead) have discovered an easy intervention that allows for the fun time and connectivity that girls crave but which also ensures we help protect their feelings of self-worth and stimulate lasting confidence for working life. - Making change doesn't have to be hard but it does have to be timely and visible. This compelling and original evidence leaves no room for doubt. Girls need positive role models, so let's make that happen by encouraging them to scroll with purpose - to bring inspiring stories of women into their world.

**Edwina Dunn**  
Founder of The Female Lead



“ I believe in disrupting your feed and doing it often - whenever scrolling starts leading you to comparison, negative self-talk or information overload, it's time to switch things up. We should all be taking regular breaks from social media, but we also have the power to change the way we feel while we are online. I try to curate my online space to be empowering, entertaining, and educational - and each of those in moderation! At its best, social media helps us feel connected and inspired, if it's making us feel any other type of way, then it's time to disrupt.

**Megan Crabbe**  
Influencer, author, activist



“ We are facing a national epidemic of young people struggling with poor mental health. The world has placed unconscionable pressures on our youngsters, some, like the pandemic, are out of their control, and others, crawl into their lives insidiously via the pressures of social media and could be avoided. Interrupt your feed. You wouldn't invite into your life someone who made you feel bad and did you harm, but an unhealthy relationship with social media is doing just that. Interrupt your feed. Women have not fought for centuries to gain status and increasing equality and respect, to be represented by headline articles comparing who wears what swimwear. Let's hear it for those who have fought adversity and won, shown compassion in a challenging world, acted selflessly and embodied kindness. Let's focus on these and other humanitarians whose presence in our social media feed can really make a difference.

**Sue Hannam**  
UK Headteacher and Chair of The Society of Heads



# Disrupt Your Feed



Terri Apter's 'Disrupt your feed 2023' report is a thought-provoking read for educationalists, tasked with the responsibility of teaching teen girls resilience and how to care for their mental and emotional health. It evidences the power of female role models in the lives of teen girls. Apter's incisive observations - rooted in the voices of young women - are deeply moving at times and powerfully illustrate how we can help teen girls to navigate social media, decipher malign influences and positively control who shapes their identity formation.

**Vanessa Ogden**  
CEO of Mulberry Schools Trust



The negatives of social media are comparing ourselves to others who we don't even know. Young people are incredibly influenced by social media. So we have to change the algorithm to things that make us feel good about ourselves and automatically come away from social media thinking that was good. I've learnt something or I've achieved something or I feel happy or I feel better about myself

**Domenique Fragale**  
Actor, Diana Award Ambassador, Mental Health Campaigner



Every woman should be cheering the impressive innovative research and new perspectives from The Female Lead. Social media both empowers and harms but female role models can make a difference for young women today.

**Jane Hoffman**  
Fellow, Harvard University,  
Author, "Your Data,  
Their Billions



The main difference for young girls is this constant access to social media and comparing yourself constantly.

**Jade Thirwall**  
Little Mix



There's a lot of power within social media and a lot of possibility for change

**Emma Dabiri - Author  
and broadcaster**

