

Growing up online



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Grown up?

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Introduction

Digital technologies form part of the everyday for many people in the UK. They intersect with how we work, learn, stay connected, organise our lives and participate in society. Where once digital life was considered a separate experience from someone's non-digital life, we find ourselves in a time where the two modalities are tangled together.

This data commentary explores, through available research, how young people are living and connecting in online spaces. It sits within the Nuffield Foundation's wider *Grown up?*¹ programme of research, which examines the realities of becoming an adult across four interconnected areas for young people today: pathways to independence; education to work; digital lives; and mental health and well-being.

This commentary is one of a series of publications examining the experiences of young people growing up with digital technologies, drawing on new analysis of existing datasets and evaluating quantitative evidence on this topic. It serves as a starting point for the subsequent publications, which will use qualitative methods to explore themes from this synthesis, and others that emerge from our discussions with young people, in more depth and nuance. This multi-methods approach comes from a recognition that digital technologies are rapidly changing and quantitative methods, particularly large-scale surveys, can take a lot of time from research design through to fieldwork, reporting, and making datasets publicly available for reuse, during which the digital technologies people interact with can change significantly. A lot of data on how young people are engaging with technologies also sits in the private sector, often limiting the availability of data on this topic.

At the same time, the concept of growing up can be difficult to define. Here, qualitative methods offer opportunities for co-creation with young people themselves in setting the parameters for the scope of study, ensuring research reflects lived experiences and resonates with their hopes, concerns and priorities.

Rethinking journeys to adulthood: An introduction highlights that the experience of growing up may be different or unique for 14–24-year-olds in the UK today, as the first generation to be entirely born in the digital age^{2,3}. Perhaps for this reason, digital technologies are at the centre of both policy and public discourses in relation to young people.

From a policy perspective, digital skills, digital inclusion and digital safety have been at the forefront of guidance in the shaping of young people's digital lives. In 2024, the current government launched its review of the national curriculum in England, which, among other things, is looking to determine the key digital skills needed in the journey to adulthood, to ensure young people are resilient to misinformation and extremist content online⁴. Improving access to digital technologies is also a priority for the government⁵, recognising that digital inequalities can have detrimental impacts on children's participation in education and communications with family and friends. In response to evidence on the risks that online spaces can pose to young people, the Online Safety Act 2023 requires digital platforms and services to assess any risks to children from using their products, requiring stronger age restrictions to protect young people from harmful content⁶.

Public discourse tends to be focused on the harms of digital technologies. These include narratives around addiction, online platforms exposing young people to harmful content, and digital devices leading to detriments to physical and emotional well-being^{7,8,9}. There are ongoing debates around whether or not smartphones (mobile phones with advanced computing capabilities and the ability to connect to the internet) should be banned in schools and the extent to which such policies should be mandated by government^{10,11,12}. News stories and influential literature around the negative impacts of smartphones and social media on young people's well-being have also led to calls for bans on social media use for under-16s¹³.

Campaign groups like *Smartphone Free Childhood* take a less regulatory stance and are advocating for parents to delay rather than ban their children's access to smartphones and social media, arguing that these technologies are not designed with young people in mind and lead to measurable and mounting risks¹⁴. The role of parents and carers in supporting, protecting, and managing their older children's/teenagers' online experiences and risks (especially for those under 18) is a major and important topic in its own right and we touch on it only briefly (see forthcoming expert commentary by ParentZone and Voice Box), as our principal focus here is on young people themselves.

Youth engagement has a critical role to play in the shaping of narratives and policy around digital technologies and the ways they affect experiences of growing up. This data commentary is a first step in a process to provide an up-to-date picture of young people's experiences with digital technologies. Further insight will follow in *Digital Lives Workshop Findings* (forthcoming) and new qualitative research which is underway¹⁵.

Using available data from young people's attitudes surveys, this data commentary synthesises overarching themes in relation to the role of digital technologies in young people's journeys to adulthood. We also embed reflections on the data available from our Youth Insight Group of 14–24-year-olds¹⁶. This is a cohort of 20 young people from across the UK who have been a core advisory group for the *Grown up?* project. Using the available data and reflections from the Youth Insight Group, we make recommendations for further areas of research in this field.

While primarily focused on data from the UK, this commentary considers evidence from other western English-speaking countries – often the United States – that may be comparable to the UK. We are guided by the following research questions:

- 1) What do quantitative data sources tell us about the level of access 14–24-year-olds have to digital technologies, how much time they spend with these technologies, and what they are doing with this time?
- 2) How do digital technologies relate to experiences of 'growing up', focusing on young people's:
 - Relationships with others
 - Individual identity formation
 - Mental health and well-being
 - Exposure to online harms.

3) How do members of our Youth Insight Group respond to, and recognise, overarching patterns in the available data about young people and their digital lives?

These research questions emerged from an initial literature review and team consultations on the broad topic of growing up and digital technologies. From this process we established that we were primarily interested in psychosocial dimensions of growing up, reflecting on the prominence of policy dilemmas and public discourse on this topic, and the limited nature of Nuffield Foundation-funded research in this territory.

Methodology

Desk-based research

To understand how digital technologies relate to the experiences of 14–24-year-olds, we conducted a ‘hermeneutic literature review’¹⁷, allowing the research team to collaboratively iterate the literature search and synthesis process. The literature reviewed included peer-reviewed research as well as wider grey research (not from academic or commercial publishers) and media coverage of issues around young people and digital life.

The following themes emerged from this review, which we focused the remainder of our desk-based research on, and which formed the basis for our research questions.

The role of digital technologies on young people’s:

- Time use
- Relationships with others
- Individual identity formation
- Mental health and well-being
- Exposure to online harms.

These themes do not explore explicit markers or milestones in the journey to adulthood. We felt participatory research methods with young people would be more appropriate for doing that, as these markers and milestones would need to resonate with young people.

We then narrowed our inclusion criteria to prioritise large-scale surveys (for example, over 1,000 respondents) with young people across our age bracket of interest (14–24). We have used available data to cover the entire span of this age group, but where that is not possible, we have focused on part of the relevant age span. Most of this research is based on the attitudes of young people in the UK. Where comparable research is not available, we reference sources from other English-speaking western nations.

Secondary data analysis

This data commentary also features secondary analysis of existing datasets. We use the latest 2022 dataset from the *Understanding Society*¹⁸ longitudinal household study, and the 2025 *How do people feel about AI?*¹⁹ dataset. These were chosen because of their relevance to our research interests, their coverage of the age range central to this study, and their robust research design. Across these datasets, we analyse descriptive statistics relating to 14–24-year-olds.

Youth Insight Group

Emergent findings from the desk-based research were presented to the programme's Youth Insight Group (see [Appendix 1](#)). Reflections from the group are included and inform our recommendations for further areas of study. In this commentary we summarise discussions from the group that relate to the themes we explored in our desk-research. Summaries draw from collaborative discussions with the team and reflections from our research partner, Hopkins Van Mil.

Glossary of terms

Before delving into the findings of this commentary, we first want to clarify terminology.

Digital technologies: Digital technologies are expansive and can mean different things to different people. In this commentary, we consider the term in the broadest sense possible, capturing:

- **Hardware** such as the physical devices people use, including smartphones, tablets, smartwatches, e-readers, laptops and desktop computers.
- **Software** – both system software needed for hardware to function (for example, operating systems on smartphones) and application software that help you carry out specific tasks on a piece of hardware (for example, email software, online applications that we can download ourselves).
- The **data** needed for many digital technologies to work (for example, personal data captured by online platforms, or operational data monitoring software performance).

Young people: As much as possible, we reference the specific age range each piece of evidence relates to. When speaking in general terms, 'young people' refers to individuals between the ages of 14 and 24.

Mental health and well-being: In this commentary mental health refers to emotional, psychological and social well-being that affects how individuals think, feel and act.

Identity: Identity, similar to digital technologies, is an expansive term. In this data commentary, we consider identity in terms of how young people come to learn about themselves and their value, as well as how they choose to present themselves to others.

Social media: We refer to social media as an umbrella term for a range of internet-based platforms that predominantly feature user-generated content (including images, videos, discussions, messages). Common platforms include Meta's Instagram and Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat and Reddit. These platforms usually have some distinct functionalities from one another and tend to be engaged with in different ways. In this commentary, we use this umbrella term where available data does not delve into the specificity of different platforms but recognise that as a general term it is limited in capturing the heterogeneity of online experiences.

Large language models (LLMs): LLMs are a type of artificial intelligence (AI) system trained on text data that can generate natural language responses to inputs or prompts²⁰. A popular example of this technology is ChatGPT, a tool that can be used to summarise notes, generate written content and provide answers to questions, among other things²¹.

Digital technologies in young people's lives

The following sections first explore young people's access to and time use of digital devices. Following this, the commentary turns to relationships with others, young people's sense of identity, and their mental health and well-being, including exposure to online harms. For the purposes of this report, we separate these latter themes out into discrete sections, but we understand that in reality, they are often interconnected.

1 Access and time use

This section collates data on the digital devices 14–24-year-olds in the UK have access to and how their time use on these devices has been measured. We draw primarily on data from *Understanding Society*²² and a range of publications from Ofcom on media use and attitudes.

These sources are relevant to our analysis due to the relevance of the age ranges they include and represent the most current data available.

Young people's access to digital devices is important from a digital inclusion perspective as key services are often mediated through technology (for example, applying for higher education, completing homework, and accessing financial services). Understanding time spent on digital devices is also helpful in light of debates around screentime, time with devices replacing physical activity, and what a healthy balance between time with and without digital technologies means for young people²³.

The types of digital devices young people have access to and how they are spending time on these devices have been measured across several large-scale and robust public-attitude surveys. Some of these surveys are detailed in [Appendix 2](#).

Box 1 contains figures from the latest Ofcom reporting on digital device access and digital media use and shows some differences between the younger and older age groups^{24,25}.

Young people's digital device access and use, 2025

13–15-year-olds²⁶

96% use mobile phones to go online

47% use tablets to go online

56% use laptops to go online

95% use social media

Top three sites/apps used are: YouTube (87%), WhatsApp (82%) and TikTok (80%).

16–24-year-olds²⁷

92% use smartphones to go online

35% use tablets to go online

55% use laptops to go online

99% use social media

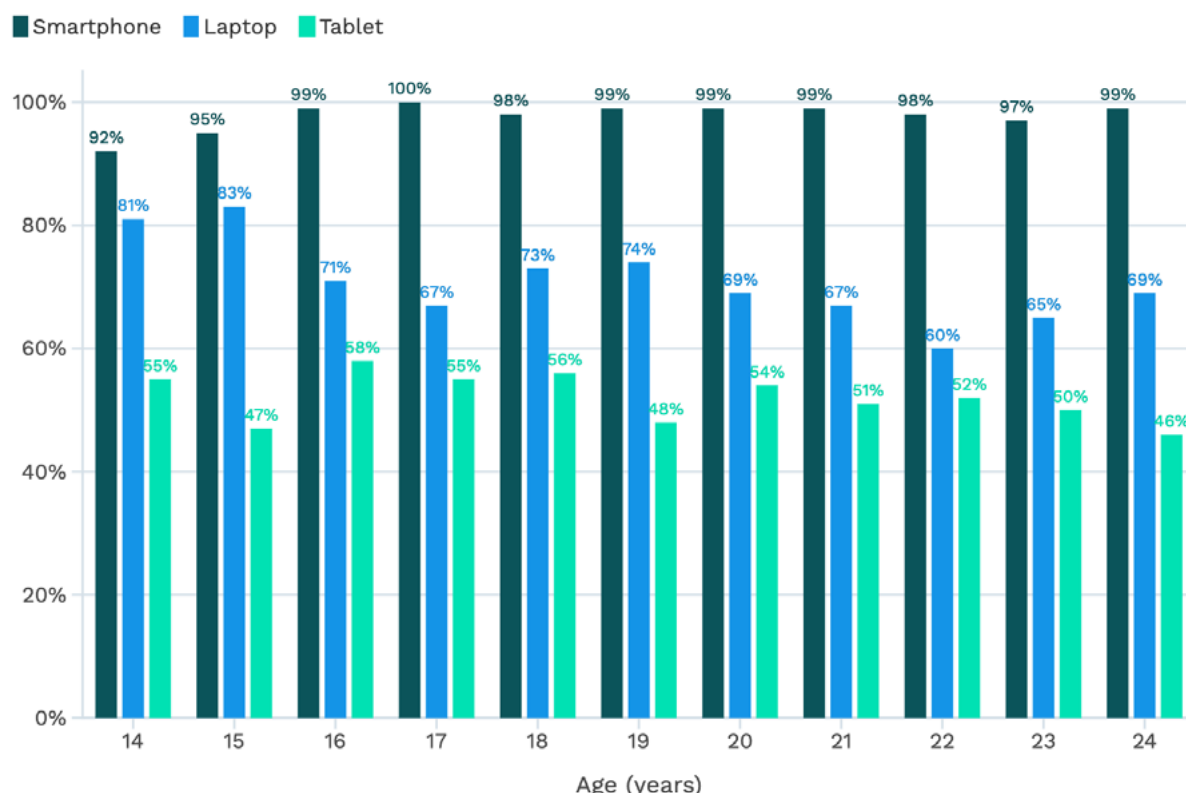
Top three social media sites used are: Instagram (85%), TikTok (78%), Snapchat (75%).

What devices do 14–24-year-olds have access to?

The types of devices people use to engage with the online world has rapidly changed over time. Trend data from the UK finds that the proportion of people aged 5–15 using smartphones or tablet devices to go online has significantly increased over the last 10 years²⁸.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, smartphones are particularly accessible for young people today. The vast majority (over 90%) of 14–24-year-olds in the UK either own a smartphone or can borrow one^{29,30}. Other digital devices, like tablets, are not as widely held across our cohort, as shown by Figure 1.

Figure 1: 14–24-year-olds' access to smartphones, laptops and tablets³¹



Note: 14–15-year-olds' values from answers to: 'Do you have any of the following devices, either of your own or that you can borrow?'

16–24-year-olds' values taken from answering 'yes' to: 'Do you personally have a mobile phone? [If yes] Is your mobile phone a smartphone?'; 'Do you have a tablet computer or iPad?'; 'Which of the following devices do you use to connect to the Internet for personal use?: ["Laptop" selected]'

[Full description of Figure 1.](#)

Figure 1 also alludes to some of the challenges around measuring access to digital devices. Access to devices can be measured in a multitude of ways. The data in Figure 1 draws from questions asking about whether devices are available in the home to borrow, whether a device is owned by the individual, and whether the device is used by an individual. The last aspect of this may seem related more to time use than access but also touches on whether a device is useable – for instance, devices with old operating systems may be present in the home but not be practical for everyday use. These different conceptualisations of device access carry different meanings and implications around connectivity, highlighting a challenge in drawing comparisons across data points as well as within a single survey on digital access.

The high levels of smartphone ownership across our age group might suggest high levels of digital participation and inclusion in the UK. But device access, particularly focusing on smartphones, offers an incomplete picture of digital inclusion. For instance, when asked to

determine what is enough to feel digitally included in a household with children, young people and parents/carers state that a suite of both digital goods and services are of importance, which includes reliable broadband, mobile data and a sufficient number of large-screen devices like laptops or tablets for young people in a household to complete schoolwork on³².

Currently, approximately 81% of households with children have full access to the digital goods and services described above³³. Factors associated with poverty, such as having a low household income or living in a deprived area, are correlated with not meeting this benchmark of digital goods and services³⁴. Digital goods and services, as we will explore in this commentary, permeate many aspects of young people's lives, including their education.

So, while smartphones appear to be readily accessible and available to 14–24-year-olds, access to other devices such as tablets and desktops or laptops may be more fragmented. And continuous access to these devices – with enough in a household for young people to participate in both schooling and work-related activities – and an internet connection, may be even more inconsistent. These inconsistencies relate to existing socio-economic inequalities in society³⁵, which are at risk of being exacerbated given the many areas of life that digital technologies permeate – including education and home learning.

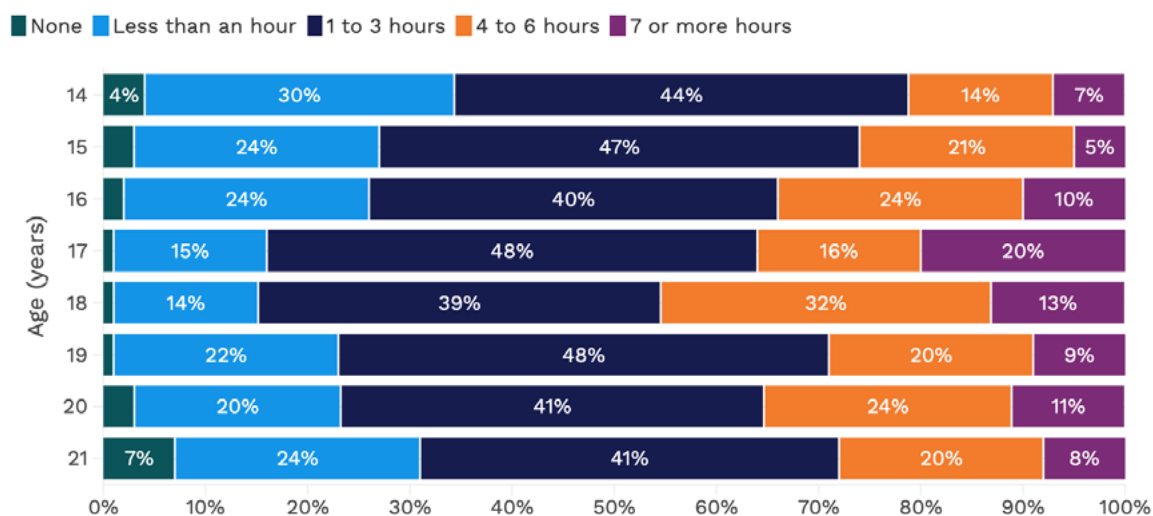
How much time are 14–24-year-olds spending online?

To understand how people are spending their time with digital technologies, researchers typically rely on self-report measures. This means individuals themselves estimate how they are spending their time, rather than relying on other metrics like time use breakdowns from their smartphones, or on more active tracking and monitoring of their own time use, though these alternative methods are becoming more widely used. This section focuses on self-reported data, as other methods are not used widely enough to produce national-level estimates.

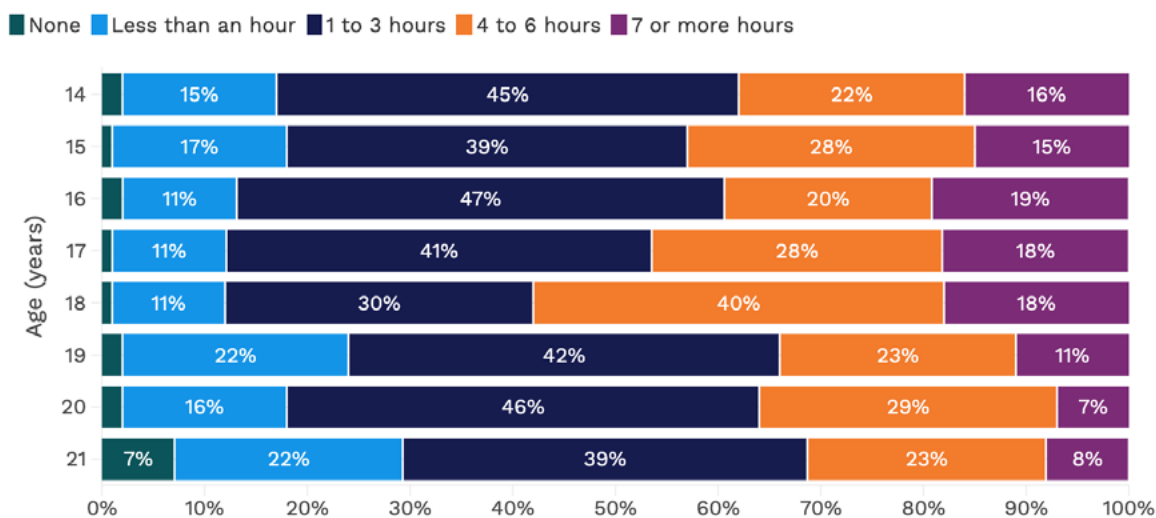
Estimates of self-reported time use on devices are variable. Most 13–18-year-olds report spending over 3.5 hours a day on average on phones^{36,37}. There is, however, considerable variation from person to person and across a typical week. For instance, 78% of 14-year-olds say they spend less than 4 hours a weekday interacting with friends through social media, gaming websites and other apps³⁸. On average, young people say they are spending longer doing these activities during weekends than on weekdays. Figure 2 shows self-reported time use with digital technologies across 14–24-year-olds, by weekday and weekend estimates. The figure shows that there is some fluctuation across age groups in terms of time use. For instance, time spent interacting with friends online appears to increase with age between the ages of 14 and 18, potentially peaking at age 18, where over 20% of people are spending over four hours a day doing this. In contrast, patterns in time use between the ages of 19 and 21 are relatively similar.

Figure 2: Hours spent by 14–21-year-olds interacting with friends online on weekdays and weekends³⁹

Weekday



Weekend



Note: Question asked: 'How many hours do you spend chatting or interacting with friends through social media, gaming websites or apps?'

[Full description of Figure 2.](#)

While Figure 2 demonstrates the prevalence of digital technologies in terms of time use, these figures alone are difficult to interpret in terms of their impacts on experiences of growing up. Data from Ofcom suggests that a significant proportion of young people are dissatisfied with the amount of time they spend on digital screens. One survey indicates that 38% of 13–17-year-olds think their time on screens is too high⁴⁰. In a different survey, a lower proportion of 18–24-year-olds (21%) say they do not feel like they have a good balance between their online and offline lives⁴¹. These data points suggest that dissatisfaction with screentime may be highest for those at the younger end of our age group of interest, leaving space for exploration into how and why screentime habits and attitudes may change over time.

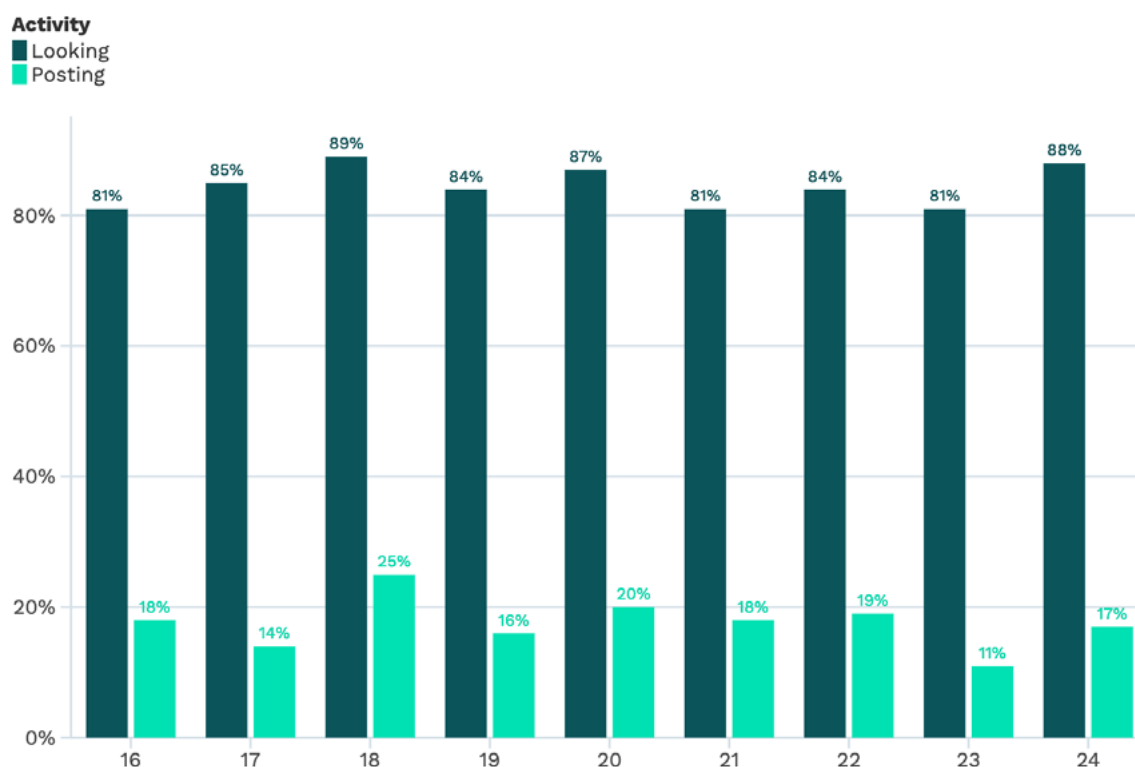
What are 14–24-year-olds doing online?

As with time use, researchers often use self-report measures to understand what people are doing on digital technologies – asking young people to state whether, and how often, they do a range of discrete tasks like gaming, browsing social media, talking to friends online, working and completing homework.

Young people are often doing a range of digital activities. The majority (99%) of 16–24-year-olds use social media (through any app or website), watch videos on platforms like YouTube (87%), Instagram (80%) and TikTok (81%), and play games online (68%)⁴². We also know that young people are required to engage with digital technologies to complete home learning activities, work, and access key services like financial banking.

Social media use in particular is central to much of the discourse surrounding young people's experiences of growing up and digital technologies. Many young people use social media every day, with the majority spending their time viewing content rather than actively posting or sharing content. Figure 3 shows cross-sectional data from the latest wave of *Understanding Society*, highlighting that the majority (over 80%) of 16–24-year-olds browse social media every day, compared to less than a quarter who actively post on social media. This distinction, though simple, highlights that within the broad category of spending time on social media, there are nuances in terms of what that means for individuals' behaviours.

Figure 3: Percentage of 16–24-year-olds daily looking through and actively posting on social media⁴³



Note: Question asked: 'How often do you use the internet for personal use in the following activities?'

Looking at social media/websites and apps (e.g., looking at text, images, videos on Facebook, Twitter)

Posting content on social media/websites and apps (e.g., posting text, images, videos on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)

[Full description of Figure 3.](#)

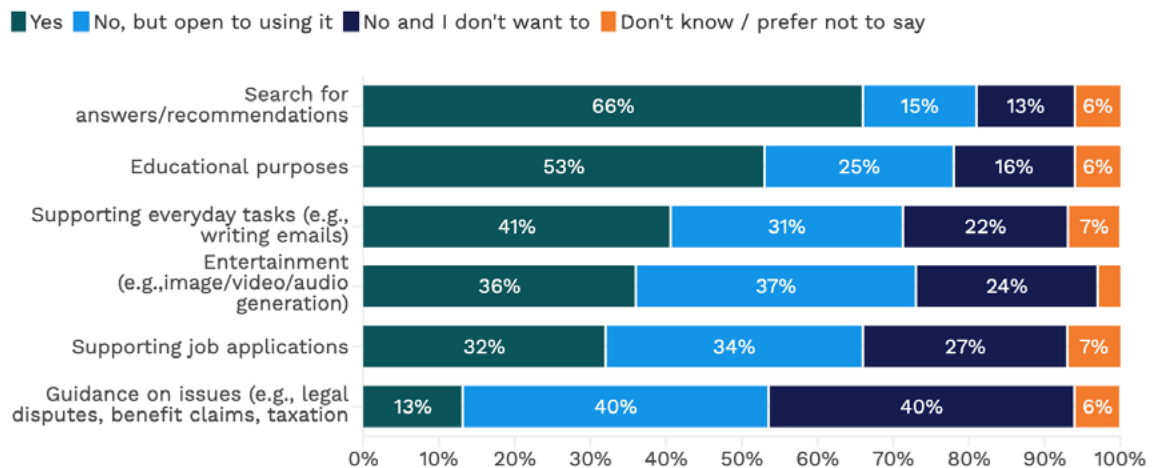
Gaming is also a significant aspect of young people's time use online. In a survey of 11–18-year-olds, 70% report gaming daily across any platform – including mobile phones, tablets and gaming consoles⁴⁴. This research found that boys were gaming more regularly than girls, with much of this happening on phones or tablets, though PC gaming and gaming consoles still had significant usage. The trend of boys playing more than girls continues through to the age of 24, with 81% of boys/men aged 16–24 years old reporting that they play games online, compared to 54% of girls/women⁴⁵.

New technologies may also be changing how young people spend their time. Analysis of the Ada Lovelace Institute's nationally representative survey of public attitudes to, and experiences with, AI technologies shows that people aged 18–24 are more likely than those aged 25 and over to have used tools like ChatGPT for searching for answers/recommendations, educational purposes, writing emails, generating content, supporting job applications, and looking for guidance on issues (Figure 4)⁴⁶. Education is a key aspect of young people's lives as they grow up, with our data showing that over half (53%) of 14–24-year-olds have used an LLM tool for learning purposes. As these tools are relatively new, we currently do

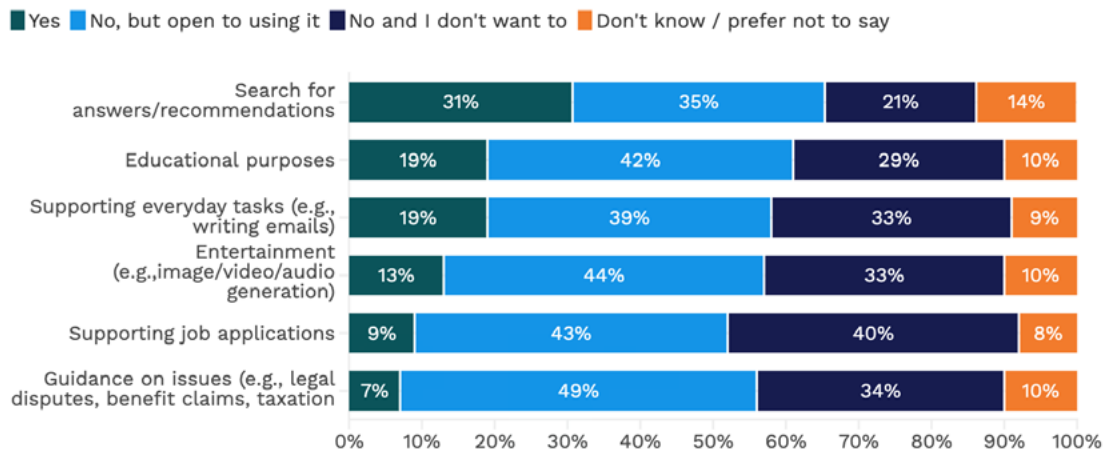
not have sufficient data on their impacts on the experiences of growing up, particularly in the transition from education to employment.

Figure 4: Personal experience of 18–24-year-olds and 25+-year-olds with LLMs, by activity⁴⁷

18–24-year-olds



25+-year-olds



Note: Question asked: 'Have you had any personal experience using large language models (LLMs) for the following tasks?'

[Full description of Figure 4.](#)

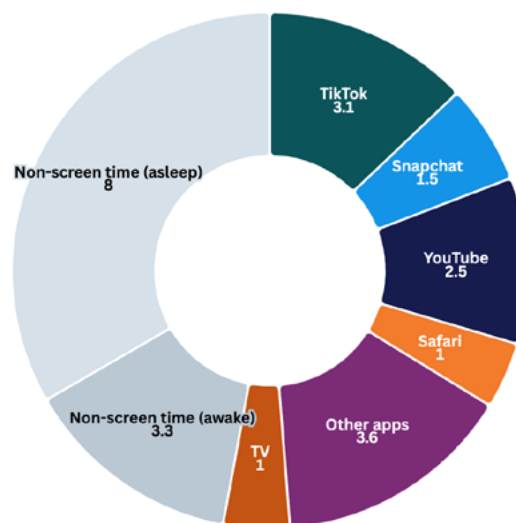
While many quantitative studies seek to categorise digital time use into discrete activities like interacting with friends on social media, gaming and watching videos, there is a recognition that time use is not always discrete. ‘Media-multitasking’ describes when individuals engage with two or more types of digital media at once, such as browsing social media while watching TV, or engaging with digital media and non-media activities at the same time, such as text messaging while studying⁴⁸.

Reflections from our Youth Insight Group

To begin a conversation around digital time use with our Youth Insight Group, we presented them with example digital time use charts from the *Children’s Media Lives* report⁴⁹. They were shown a pie chart of how a 14-year-old spent their time on their phones on a weekend (see Figure 5). They were then asked to reflect on these charts and discuss whether they resonated with their own experiences.

Figure 5: Example weekend time use chart of a 14-year-old⁵⁰

24 hours



[Full description of Figure 5.](#)

Notably, these charts did not elicit emotive or judgmental responses – many were neither shocked nor surprised by what they saw: “I think it is pretty reasonable [...] in a regular day of a 14-year-old, it is pretty reasonable”. One group member emphasised the need for sensitivity when researching digital time, showing an awareness that spending lots of time with devices often carries negative connotations.

"[We need to] treat everyone with empathy, as we do not know what people may go through – some may spend a lot of time online because they are trying to escape something. Important to speak sensitively..."

Member of the Youth Insight Group

There was also a sense across the group that the actual time use figure offers little insight into digital life, and instead, there needs to be attention on how time is being spent, rather than how much time. A group member asked, "What do we want young people to do on the weekends?" prompting discussion into what 'good' time use – in both an offline and online context – might be. Ideas of what is typical were also recognised to be individualised: "I think in some people's cases that [the time shown in the pie chart] might be quite a lot. It depends what they are doing [online] as well."

There was some discussion around how time with digital devices changes over the course of growing up. One of the older group members gave an example around social media platforms, discussing how they feel they have aged out of some platforms.

"When I was younger, I used to use Snapchat, then moved to Instagram. And Tik Tok just slipped me by; I was a little bit older. An age thing..."

Member of the Youth Insight Group

Others mentioned implementing strategies to limit the amount of time they spend on devices, with some sharing a sense of not feeling in control of their device use. One group member shared that over the last couple of years, they have "learnt not to use [their] phone a lot", and this was driven by a desire to live more of life offline. Another spoke of the experience of "always" having the phone in their hands.

"I am so bad with my phone [...] I always have a phone in my hand. Because I am working now, if I have five minutes in between, I scroll. It's not healthy, is it? But I think it is more of a repetition, like muscle memory, grab for my phone."

Member of the Youth Insight Group

There was a sense that personal choice around time use only went so far, particularly as digital devices form a critical part of cultural and social infrastructure, and young people navigate complex algorithms designed to drive engagement.

Another member highlighted that the business model of social media platforms makes regulating time use difficult for young people: "People have choice, but also these social media companies are preying on them, so it is not always a choice".

The reflections from the Youth Insight Group show that topics such as screentime are not neutral. They carry assumptions around what it means to have a ‘healthy’ relationship with digital devices, with narratives of ‘addiction’ prevalent among 14–24-year-olds. The young people in our Youth Insight Group expressed some resistance to these assumptions, highlighting the importance of empathy when interpreting screentime data. This group also alluded to the necessity of screentime – being ‘expected’ to use technology – which could point to the digitisation of key services and activities such as completing homework, applying for higher education, or entering full-time employment. Together, these reflections point to the importance of examining potential biases or assumptions that may be affecting a researcher’s starting position before they carry out a project, as well as subsequent research questions and interpretations of data.

Considerations for further research

Capturing time spent online is complex. It is difficult to interpret measures of time use without reading them in relation to what an individual perceives as either too much or too little, as beneficial or concerning. Without this knowledge, we as researchers risk projecting our own assumptions of what an appropriate amount of time engaging with digital technologies means, without leaving space for the experiences and values of young people themselves. At the same time, it is important to consider time spent with digital technologies in the context of a young person’s development and their offline lives – particularly if there is evidence to suggest excessive time spent with devices may be related to poorer cognitive skills and less physical activity.

In addition, broad categories like spending time on social media tell us little about how people aged 14–24 are engaging with digital technologies, or their motivations for doing so. Researchers have thought carefully about how to add more specificity to measures of digital time use – for instance, differentiating between time spent actively engaging with platforms compared to time spent viewing and consuming content. Further insights may come from researchers experimenting with measures other than self-reported time use. It is well established that relying on self-report measures in this field is unreliable, introducing high levels of measurement error⁵¹. Moreover, defining time spent on digital devices is challenging; as technology changes, so do the ways people interact with it. For example, the emergence of LLMs in the public domain has already cut across the ways young people use digital technologies – for instance, as a tool to search for answers or recommendations (as we will discuss later). This changing landscape requires data collection methods to be responsive to emergent technologies and applications.

Further research in this domain may benefit from:

- Co-creation with a diverse range of people aged 14–24 to define the categories for device usage that feel most relevant to them
- Exploration into non-discrete classifications of device usage – for example, multitasking
- Exploration of how – and why – time with devices changes as young people grow older
- Study of the factors that may be underlying time spent online and driving individual differences in higher or lower levels of screentime

- Study of whether young people make trade-offs in their offline activities for more time on devices.

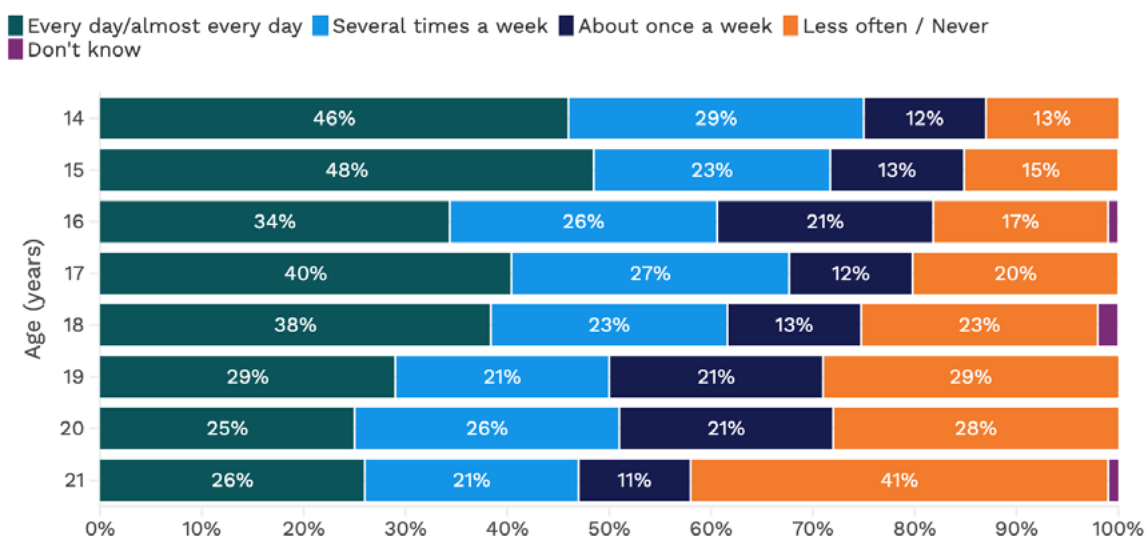
At the same time, we must also recognise that much of the data on how young people interact with digital technologies sits within the private rather than the public sector. This concentration reinforces a power imbalance between the private sector and civil society, allowing the former to use data from young people to build their business offerings. There is a range of methods that enable researchers to obtain information and collect data from organisations about their users – such as voluntary research partnerships, data scraping, and purchasing data – but researchers have generally characterised this level of access as inadequate⁵². It is therefore important for policy options to be considered to address the power inequalities between the private sector and civil society organisations / independent researchers in this field. For instance, recommendations have been made for the establishment of an independent intermediary body that can serve as a governance function for data access, to facilitate the process without burdening researchers or companies^{53,54}.

2 Relationships

Relationships play a vital role in our lives and undergo substantial changes in the journey to adulthood, with friendships beginning to supersede family members in providing space for confiding and support^{55,56}. By offering a range of ways for communicating with others, sharing interests, and building bonds, digital technologies may play an important role in sustaining offline relationships and forming new ones.

Sustaining relationships

Data from *Understanding Society* indicates that 40% of 14-year-olds and 42% of 15-year-olds get together with friends online daily (Figure 6), including on mobile phones, social media or through gaming. This figure is lower for older age groups – for example, it's 24% for 21-year-olds. This data, as a snapshot rather than a longitudinal trend, highlights potential shifts in the role digital technologies play for young people across age groups, with younger people perhaps using these tools more to stay connected with friends than older people do.

Figure 6: Frequency of 14–21-year-olds getting together with friends online⁵⁷

Note: Question asked: 'In a typical week, how often do you get together with friends online (including on your mobile phone, on social media, or through online gaming)?'

[Full description of Figure 6.](#)

There is some evidence of positive impacts of digital technologies on building and sustaining existing relationships. Just under half (46%) of 10–17-year-olds say that their online life has had a mostly positive impact on their relationships with friends they often see in person⁵⁸, while many (72% of 13–17-year-olds) say the use of social networking or communication apps helps them feel closer to their friends⁵⁹. A systematic review of quantitative evidence from high-income countries finds that for 10–19-year-olds, the use of social media to maintain existing friendships has a positive effect on the quality of these relationships⁶⁰.

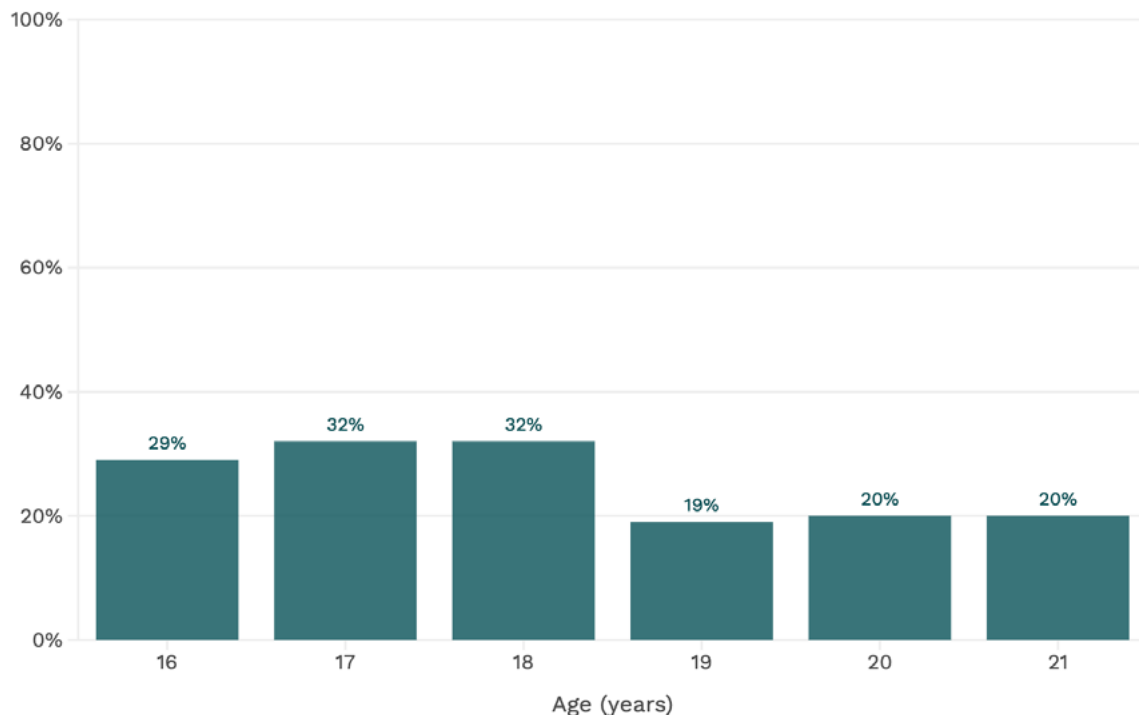
Building new relationships

There is substantial interest from a safety perspective in how young people build new relationships online. From gaming platforms to dating apps, digital technologies offer a range of ways to interact with strangers over the internet.

We find that, at least for those under the age of 16, digital technologies are primarily used for communicating with people they have met in person rather than for engaging with new people⁶¹. 2024 data from the ONS on 10–15-year-olds shows that one in five (19%) had spoken to or exchanged messages in the last 12 months with someone they had never met before⁶². Less recent data from 2022 reveals that a quarter (25%) of 16–21-year-olds have a close friend that they have never met in person⁶³. Figure 7 shows the breakdown of this statistic by age, with young people aged 16–18 more likely to report they have a close friend they have never met in person than those aged 19–21. These data points suggest that as young people grow older, they become slightly more likely to build relationships online with people they have not met before, before the incidence of these behaviours seems to decline from the age of 19. This drop

perhaps coincides with entering higher education or employment, though without qualitative data on the subject, we do not know the motivations that underpin these observations.

Figure 7: Percentage of 16–21-year-olds who have a close friend they have not met in person⁶⁴



[Full description of Figure 7.](#)

Social media platforms are usually how young people interact with people they do not know personally. Platforms like Reddit, X and TikTok in particular, are where young people aged 11–18 report doing this⁶⁵. Other platforms, such as Snapchat and Instagram, tend to be reserved for interacting with people known personally, though even here, young people often receive friend/follow requests from strangers (47% of 11–18-year-olds weekly on Snapchat, 46% on Instagram)⁶⁶. The differences in behaviours and interactions across platforms highlight that social media is not a homogeneous concept, and using the term in this way can limit our understanding of the impacts of these platforms on experiences of growing up. The heterogeneity in social media platform use also presents methodological challenges in terms of surveying. For instance, sample sizes for less widely used social media platforms – like Discord and Twitch – can often become too small to report on at an individual-platform level; equally, ensuring good coverage of users of specific platforms may skew the representativeness of the sample as a whole, an issue present in the Ofcom data we have just reported⁶⁷.

Dating apps are another way young people meet new people. These applications allow users to set their preferences in terms of gender, location and other attributes they are looking for

in a partner. UK data suggests that 18% of 18–24-year-olds have visited online dating sites, representing the highest prevalence of dating site use in a survey of adults⁶⁸. Polling finds that 10% of 18–24-year-olds have a romantic partner they met through dating apps like Hinge or Tinder, the joint most common way of meeting a romantic partner, along with meeting through university or higher education⁶⁹.

Yet despite the popularity of these digital tools, young people express frustrations with online dating. Synthesis of dating app engagement from Ofcom in 2024 suggests that the reach of popular apps like Tinder and Hinge is on the decline when compared with data from the previous year⁷⁰. An earlier 2018 study of 16–24-year-olds in the UK reports that 21% of those looking for a partner had stopped using the dating sites they were registered with, and 90% reported negative experiences with dating apps, including struggling to start a conversation, getting ‘catfished’ (misled about the identity of the person they were speaking to) or simply finding people who were not looking for the same things⁷¹.

Together, these findings show that digital technologies do play a role in how young people form relationships, with many turning to digital tools to build new friendships and explore romantic connections. Research into whether the longevity of online relationships differs from those formed offline, and if life-stage or age differentially impacts this longevity, would provide further insight into how these tools might be changing the experience of growing up.

Reflections from our Youth Insight Group

We asked the Youth Insight Group about their personal experiences of building relationships online. The group shared that relationships originating online can sometimes lead to strong, positive bonds that would not have otherwise been possible, but also raised concerns around false identities and online safety.

They explained how digital technology enables them to make new friends, including through shared interest communities. For many, it also helps sustain relationships with friends and family around the world, and members commented on the value of this capability.

“I have a lot of friends that live quite far away, and I can use things like video games to spend time with them.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

The group highlighted the importance of having strong digital skills when navigating relationships online to stay safe, and there was some indication that developing these skills required maturity and life experience. Several members said that younger people need stronger safeguards and monitoring online, as they may be less aware of the harms they are exposing themselves to.

“You need to have an awareness of people’s intentions online. For example, with gaming, you are definitely playing with older people online, but [they do not] always [have] ill intent. But then there’s the evil side of things, where people are preying on younger people. We need safeguards and monitoring of usage. My own Internet usage was never monitored.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

“I met four or five people whom I originally met online. [...] For kids who are isolated, [the] internet can be a good place to develop their social skills. So, it is good, but people need to be aware that there may be people who do not have good intentions towards young people.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

There was also some worry from members around how digital technologies might be affecting young people’s ability to socialise in person. Some members shared that digital technologies can offer easy ways of sustaining communications – for example, through sharing photos and videos, and sustaining ‘streaks’ (daily contact with another person) on apps like Snapchat, where users contact each other every day, which are difficult to replicate in person, making in-person communications sometimes more challenging. The ease of online access can also deter some people from engaging in person.

“The thing is, people don’t go out as much because everything you need is online – I’m definitely inclined to cancel in-person plans.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

New ways of engaging with technology and developing relationships also emerged in the conversation, with one group member mentioning that they might ask LLM tools like ChatGPT a question, which leads to a conversation. We were not able to explore in depth the impact of conversational tools like this on young people, but the mention of AI chatbots and LLMs points to an emerging area where AI might be affecting the experience of growing up and developing social relationships.

The reflections from the Youth Insight Group resonate with some of the findings from our desk-based research. They offer examples of digital technologies strengthening relationships with others and being used to build new relationships. This group of 14–24-year-olds also point to ways digital technologies may be changing the way young people relate to one another – for instance, creating opportunities for those with social anxiety to practice their social skills in a more comfortable setting – while also expressing worries around online safety and the impact of online communications on relationships. The emergence of AI-powered chatbots presents

an additional area of study for researchers, showing the evolving nature of digital technologies and, therefore, the need for responsive research in this field. The Ada Lovelace Institute is currently scoping [additional research on AI assistants](#).

Considerations for further research

The data above highlights the prevalence of digital technologies in sustaining relationships and building new ones, as well as the benefits young people perceive and the concerns they have. Further research into this area could explore:

- Young people's perceptions of the norms of social interaction with peers, and whether digital technologies alter these norms
- The benefits and potential harms of online communications for young people with social anxieties
- Whether interactions with AI-powered assistants – like chatbots – are changing young people's social and emotional development.

3 Identity

In this data commentary, we consider identity in terms of how young people come to learn about themselves and their values. As a concept, it holds many dimensions; those we will touch on include self-esteem, sexual identity and gender identity, and hobbies and interests.

Here, we consider the transition from childhood to adulthood as a time when individuals draw on their previous experiences, societal expectations and their personal aspirations to establish their values and 'find' themselves⁷². Previous research indicates that digital technologies, including social media, offer environments where young people "can interact, display, and receive feedback about themselves", contributing to the formation of their self-concept and exploration of their identity⁷³.

Online communications can moderate how young people present themselves to others. This moderation can make social interactions easier. For instance, higher proportions of 11–18-year-olds describe themselves as outgoing or confident when they communicate online than when they communicate in person (71% vs 53%)⁷⁴. An international systematic review of empirical evidence in this area suggests that social media may facilitate and support the development of self-concept and identity, offering a buffer to in-person interaction for those who experience identity-related anxiety⁷⁵.

Yet tools like social media can exacerbate feelings of poor self-esteem by heightening social comparisons with others. Nearly half (48%) of 14–22-year-olds report that after using social media, they feel that other people's lives are better than their own. In the same study, young people report that social media has a negative impact on their body image, with this feeling more prevalent for those aged 18–22 than 14–17-year-olds (43% and 31% respectively)⁷⁶. Gender differences also emerge in relation to the effects of social media on body image. In a separate survey to the one mentioned above, girls aged 14–17 are more likely than boys of the

same age to be concerned about online content promoting excessive or unhealthy dieting and exercise⁷⁷.

These findings point to the ways online experiences can be both beneficial and potentially harmful for young people as they develop their sense of identity. This duality has been identified in particular for LGBTQ+ young people. For example, most (89%) LGBTQ+ young people report seeing comments online that celebrate LGBTQ+ identities. However, the same young people also encounter both transphobic and homophobic comments more frequently than non-LGBTQ+ youth (with 75% LGBTQ+ youth reporting seeing transphobic comments compared to 55% of non-LGBTQ+ youth, and 76% seeing homophobic comments compared to 49%)⁷⁸.

Digital technologies also offer ways for young people to develop their interests and connect with like-minded people. Shared interests are often a reason young people make connections with new people online. For instance, in a survey on a wide range of social media platforms, nearly half (48%) of 11–18-year-olds who use various social media platforms say they make a new connection online every week because the person they are connecting with has similar interests to them⁷⁹. Two-fifths (43%) of 13–17-year-olds also report watching ‘how-to’ videos or tutorials about hobbies or things they are interested in, with recommender systems on social media platforms often offering young people content that has been personalised to match their interests and hobbies⁸⁰. However, recommender systems and the hyper-personalisation and targeting these systems permit have also raised concerns about the viewpoints young people are exposed to at a critical time in their development. Recently, a project conducted algorithmic archetype modelling⁸¹ and interviews with young people and school leaders, finding that social media platforms like TikTok can, through recommender systems, amplify harmful content to young people, including misogynistic and sexist ideologies⁸².

The data above shows how digital technologies can present opportunities for young people to learn about themselves and develop their interests. For some young people, this can be a positive experience, leading to better self-esteem and opportunities to connect with like-minded peers. For others, these technologies can leave young people vulnerable to attacks on their sense of self, leading to potentially detrimental impacts on their overall well-being. Our data highlights that LGBTQ+ youth may be more vulnerable to both the positive and negative effects of digital technologies on identity development. At the same time, there is evidence to suggest that the design of popular online platforms can amplify harmful values, potentially negatively impacting the development of young people’s world views and values.

Reflections from our Youth Insight Group

We asked our Youth Insight Group what their personal experience has been of working out things about themselves through their digital life. While some did not make a connection between their digital life and their sense of self, others reflected on how technologies can affect the way they present themselves, can offer opportunities for community building, and can support their journey of understanding who they are.

The group commented that digital technologies can provide ‘freedom’ to explore places and information in ways that they would not be able to in day-to-day life. This freedom can allow people to *try on* different identities as they learn more about themselves and for some, having

space to do so has been particularly important in the context of not feeling safe to do so at home or school.

“I can cosplay [dress up as a character from a film, book or video game] online and delete a hate comment easier than in person, as you might get harassed in the street.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

This freedom was felt to be liberating for some, and unsettling for others.

“When you are online, you can be whoever you want to. In a few minutes’ time, you can be a new identity. It can be dangerous. I can be a really different person online than I am offline.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

For some people, online spaces facilitated self-discovery in terms of their gender or sexual identity: “I found [out] about my sexuality online. At the time, I could not open up in my household”. The group remarked on the value of online spaces for finding a community, be that around shared interests or shared identity markers. These spaces may even be safer for some than ‘offline’ communities, as one member highlighted that being “a minority within a minority, it can be dangerous to [seek information and support] through word of mouth”.

Bringing together the reflections from young people with the desk-based data reviewed above highlights the nuanced ways young people use digital technologies to develop their sense of identity. Particularly for those who may otherwise experience marginalisation, digital technologies can afford safety in this exploration.

Considerations for further research

Identity formation is a highly nuanced and rich area of study with literature that cuts across disciplines and research domains. When writing this commentary, we came across insightful and fine-grained qualitative research at small scales delving into the specificities of digital technologies and identity development. Quantitative research with young people may benefit from:

- Further research with young people experiencing marginalisation, including a deeper understanding of intersectionality in relation to the role of digital technologies in identity development
- Data encouraging a retrospective view of the different roles digital technologies has played in an individual’s life as they develop their sense of self over time
- Exploration of the roles of online communities in young people’s lives as they grow older.

4 Well-being

The impacts of digital technologies on young people's well-being and safety have been at the forefront of both policy and public discourse and underpin the Online Safety Act. While young people have always been at risk of harms to their well-being, digital technologies have shifted how they are exposed to and experience harms.

Harms like bullying now have an online component, while some harms like targeted mis/disinformation have emerged as technologies have developed. In this context, young people are navigating risks that appear online in different ways from those faced by previous generations, as well as risks arising from the design of digital services. To begin to unpack some of these risks and their impacts on young people's well-being, we briefly look at available survey data on well-being and exposure to online harms.

We recognise that this topic requires more depth than this data commentary will allow, and as such, we have only focused on some areas of well-being and harms. Specifically, we look at data on the impacts of social media on well-being and exposures to online harms.

Social media and well-being

For the purposes of this data commentary, we consider mental health as a concept referring to emotional, psychological and social well-being, which affects the way individuals think, act and feel. Existing research highlights that this well-being affects how people cope with stressors, realise their personal abilities, learn and work, and contribute to their communities⁸³.

In this section, we explore the impacts of social media on well-being, focusing on general mental health rather than clinical disorders. Social media platforms in particular have been discussed extensively in relation to their impacts on young people's well-being as they can expose young people to a range of harms, including nasty comments from others, suicide, self-harm and eating disorder content, violent images and videos, sexually explicit content, pornography and misogynistic influencers⁸⁴.

Young people do report social media – in a general sense – affecting how they feel or act. For example, two-fifths (38%) of people aged 8–24 agree with the statement: 'social media has a negative impact on people like me'⁸⁵. In addition, nearly half (46%) of 14–24-year-olds feel that social media has reduced their ability to concentrate on other things, speaking to societal concerns around digital technologies and cognition^{86,87}. Experiences of marginalisation may exacerbate the negative impacts of social media on well-being, with those from LGBTQ+ backgrounds and disabled young people reporting more commonly that social media has a negative impact on people like them⁸⁸. Poor mental health may also interact with how people are impacted by social media, particularly in relation to social comparisons with others. For instance, 64% of 14–24-year-olds with depressive symptoms feel that other people's lives are better than their own, compared to 38% with no depressive symptoms⁸⁹.

At the same time, young people report positive impacts of social media on social connection and self-expression. In a 2022 McKinsey Health Institute survey of over 42,000 participants from 26 countries (predominantly European nations), over half (57%) of 13–24-year-olds say social media has a mostly positive impact on their self-expression, with 56% feeling the

same for social connectivity⁹⁰. Similarly, in a more recent UK-based survey from Ofcom, when answering from their personal experience, over half (59%) of 16–24-year-olds feel that the benefits of using social media apps or websites outweigh the risks, compared to 15% who feel the risks outweigh the benefits and 26% who are unsure⁹¹.

These mixed experiences may reflect ‘an internet of extremes’⁹². This is where the internet is becoming simultaneously more essential and more distressing for young people. For instance, there is a general sense that the internet is important for social connection (for example, 56% of young people feel the internet is important for meeting good friends), and learning new things, but many still have negative experiences online or witness unpleasant behaviours⁹³.

Important to note is that evidence to support a causal link between social media use and poor mental health for young people aged 14–24 today is fragmented, facing strong methodological challenges. A meta-analysis of 46 studies of youth social media use and mental health found that the evidence to date does not support claims of harmful effects of social media use on mental health issues⁹⁴. This was true for both boys and girls across correlational and longitudinal studies.

The authors of this meta-analysis highlight that research in this domain suffers from overinterpretation of statistically significant, but very weak effects; small effect sizes in large samples; and the reliability of self-reported behaviours. Similarly, longitudinal analysis of *Understanding Society* data from 10–15-year-olds finds that there is not a causal link between time spent on social media and later mental health problems, with factors such as self-esteem potentially explaining the relationship observed between the two.⁹⁵ Other studies have similar results, finding that factors like social support can mitigate against negative outcomes on well-being from social media⁹⁶.

A recent review from the Youth Futures Foundation references five randomised controlled trials in this field, which tested whether reduction or abstinence from social media improved symptoms of anxiety or depression, four of which detected improvements. However, as the authors note, small-to-medium sample sizes, short follow-up periods, and potential placebo effects may limit the validity of these findings⁹⁷.

The lack of data to support a strong causal relationship may seem at odds with cross-sectional evidence that does find associations between mental health and social media use. We do not suggest that a lack of causal evidence means that there is no evidence of a relationship. Instead, it highlights the importance of taking a holistic approach when examining mental health and digital technologies, with individual differences in existing well-being, experiences of marginalisation, and other factors also vital to consider. At the same time, while a causal relationship cannot currently be established from the quantitative data, this does not mean that social media does not have an impact on mental health. It may be the case that the experiences of particular groups or individuals provide different insights from a perspective based on averages discussed above.

Research from Dr Amy Orben and colleagues⁹⁸, commissioned by the UK government’s Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, may offer additional insight here. We look forward to their findings on young people’s smartphone and social media use, and welcome

their recognition of rapid behavioural changes and consideration of how the experiences of vulnerable young people can be captured in research.

Exposure to online harms

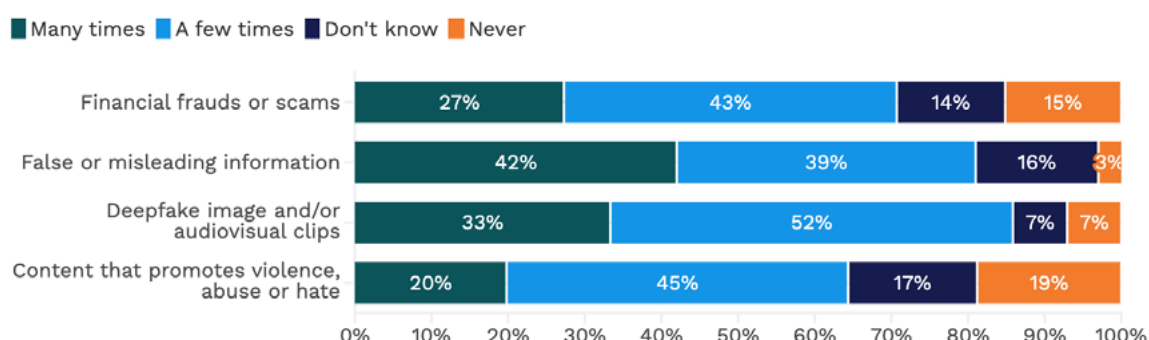
As discussed earlier, digital technologies can expose young people to a range of potentially harmful content that can affect their well-being and feelings of safety. Here we explore exposure to, and encounters with, untrue or violent content, sexually explicit content, and cyberbullying. We think about how this content affects the ways young people engage with digital technologies. Multiple studies find that around three-quarters (75–77%) of young people under the age of 18 report feeling safe online^{99,100}.

Yet even with this general feeling of safety, a substantial proportion of young people have encountered content online that has the potential to cause, or is likely to cause, harm – for example, content that may be untrue (41% of 9–16-year-olds report this) or violent (22% of 9–16-year-olds report this)¹⁰¹.

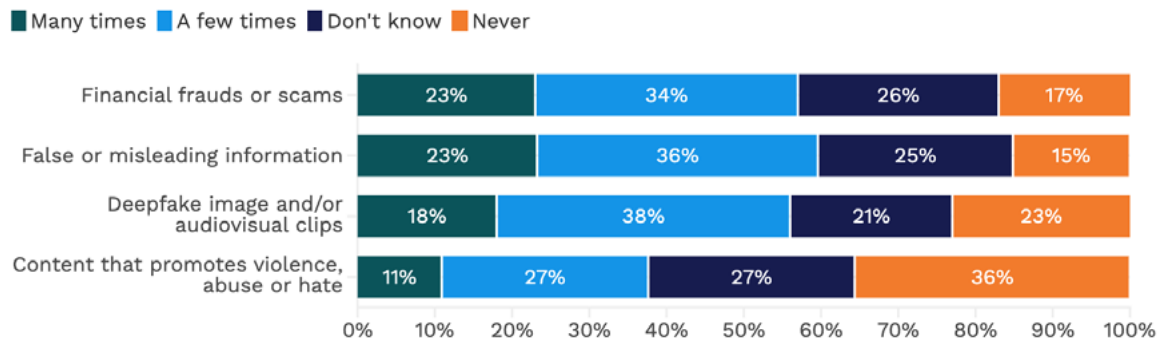
Exposures to this type of content may be even higher for those aged 18–24 when compared with older participants. Analysis of the 2025 *How do people feel about AI?* survey shows that 81% of 18–24-year-olds in the UK have encountered false or misleading information online, and 65% have seen content that promotes violence, abuse or hate¹⁰². These encounters appear more pronounced for young people, with fewer people over the age of 25 reporting seeing harmful content online (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Encounters with potentially AI-generated harms of 18–24-year-olds and 25+-year-olds¹⁰³

18–24-year-olds



25+-year-olds



Note: Question asked: 'To what extent have you encountered the following types of harms online that might have been generated by AI?'

[Full description of Figure 8.](#)

Important to note is that young people are not naïve to the harms of online spaces. Young people often report taking active measures to manage their online behaviours to avoid harms, usually to avoid overexposure to digital technologies; this can include setting time limits on specific applications and taking breaks from using devices¹⁰⁴. Enacting strategies to avoid unpleasant content online appears to be more common among older young people, with 81% of 18–22-year-olds saying they use strategies to avoid seeing things they do not like online compared to 68% of 14–17-year-olds¹⁰⁵. In the absence of more structural safeguards for young people from harmful content, these behaviours point to ways in which young people try to take control of their digital experiences and how older people in our cohort of interest may be more comfortable or confident in doing so than younger people. At the time of writing, the Online Safety Act has been rolled out, but it will take time to see if the Act's implementation can provide the structural safeguards those under 18 need and want.

Sexually explicit content

Against this backdrop of feeling generally safe online, but still being exposed to harmful content, there are more specific challenges around young people and sexually explicit content and behaviours. This sits within a broader narrative around the age and developmental appropriateness of content young people encounter online and how exposure to this content might affect an individual's well-being.

Over half of 11–17-year-olds (51% of 11–13s, 66% of 14–15s, 79% of 16–17s) report having seen pornography at some point, and for two-thirds of 11–13-year-olds (63%), their first exposure to pornography has been unintentional¹⁰⁶. Unintentional routes described by this cohort included Google searches using search terms without fully understanding their meaning, receiving links to pornographic sites from friends without knowing what the content would include, adverts or pop-ups on streaming or gaming websites, and being shown videos on a friend's phone.

That this exposure is often unintentional rather than self-directed raises questions around individual autonomy and agency when navigating online spaces, as well as protections from age-inappropriate content. However, these findings need to be interpreted cautiously as self-reports around exposure to sexually explicit content may be subject to biases in responses, with young people potentially feeling more comfortable declaring exposure as accidental rather than intentional.

Gendered inequalities also appear in relation to experiences of sexually explicit content online. In a 2021 survey of over five thousand 14–18-year-olds carried out across 64 schools and colleges in the UK, more girls than boys report having received a nude photo that they did not want (16% of girls, compared to 4% of boys)¹⁰⁷. In this same survey, girls are also more likely than boys to report having nude or nearly nude photos of themselves that they have shared to be shared with other people without their consent (24% of girls, compared to 9% of boys). The use of a school-based survey in this study carries important methodological strengths, specifically in that responses may be less vulnerable to biases in self-reporting that may arise if a survey were carried out at home under the supervision of a parent or carer.

Gendered inequalities are also emerging around sexually explicit deepfakes – audiovisual material generated by AI to misrepresent a person or a thing. For instance, qualitative insights reveal a higher prevalence of worry among girls than boys about this technological capability, often making a link between this type of online content and offline threats to their safety¹⁰⁸.

Cyberbullying

Another unique harm of digital technologies includes cyberbullying. While there is no universal definition of cyberbullying, practitioners have described it as negative behaviour that causes harm or upset to someone else, conducted through a screen or device with repetition and intentionality¹⁰⁹. This form of bullying presents different challenges when compared with offline bullying, particularly in its ability to continue around the clock and affect young people in both public and private spaces¹¹⁰. Recently, cyberbullying emerged as a key concern among children under the age of 18¹¹¹, and evidence suggests that as many as two-fifths (39%) of people aged 11–25 have experienced cyberbullying in their lifetime¹¹².

Girls, more so than boys, report having experienced ‘nasty or hurtful’ messages via communications technologies, suggesting a potential gendered nature to this harm¹¹³. Similar inequalities appear for vulnerable young people, such as those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including those with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan¹¹⁴. In a UK survey of 9–16-year-olds, over a third of children with SEND (35%) and children with an EHC plan (38%) report encountering instances of abuse and bullying online, compared to 24% of those without these vulnerabilities¹¹⁵. There is less data on how other factors, like ethnicity and lived experience of poverty, relate to experiences of online harms like cyberbullying, and how these characteristics intersect with one another to influence experiences of these harms. This lack of data may be because of issues related to sampling, where sample sizes for identity groups become too small to meaningfully analyse, as well as considerations around ethics, particularly due to the sensitive nature of online harms.

Reflections from our Youth Insight Group

We shared with our Youth Insight Group some of our preliminary findings around social media use and well-being, highlighting that there is not enough evidence to confirm that social media definitely causes poor mental health. Youth Insight Group members were asked to reflect on what they would want technology companies and policymakers to know about how online platforms impact on their own well-being.

Cyberbullying emerged in the discussions. One group member reflected on how this form of harm can be for an all-encompassing for an individual.

“There is a lot of bullying online. A friend of mine dropped out of college because of bullying, but could not get away from this, as they could still bully him online.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

Group members also discussed the role of social media and the negative consequences of social comparisons. One member commented that social media can enable social comparisons between both people you know and those you do not, leaving users feeling unhappy with their own lives. Another felt social media could alter people’s self-perceptions, particularly around body image.

“Plastic surgery is so rife today, it is not taboo anymore. [And it is] pushed to younger social media [users]. Social media made us believe we have to be perfect at all times.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

There was a strong desire across the Youth Insight Group for better regulation and governance of social media platforms. Group members reflected on how the online environment can feel like a liminal space where ‘real-world rules’ do not apply, and they were worried about what this meant for accountability and responsibility. There were calls for better content moderation to ensure the content young people are exposed to on social media is age-appropriate and that there are measures to prevent people from taking on fake identities online. Underlying these views was a sense that technology companies should be more accountable for the services they provide to young people. Group members felt that parents and carers alone cannot be responsible for the content young people see online, particularly as many parents and carers do not know how children and young people spend their time online.

“[Technology companies need to] take accountability. It’s not just profit, it’s people’s lives”

“I don’t think that responsibility [for safety] should be on parents or carers. Many parents or carers do not care. Children are exposed to content, and their parents do not know.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

The necessity of online spaces was reflected on in relation to worries around addiction to technology. The group felt that care needs to be taken in understanding how people may relate to digital technologies and self-regulate their usage as everyday life becomes increasingly digitised.

“With technology, you’re expected to use it through school, through assignments, through LinkedIn, through applying to jobs [...] there’s no way to kind of escape from it.”

Member of the Youth Insight Group

In lieu of stronger regulation, the group also discussed the role of schools and the home. They felt that there could be more in the curriculum to teach young people to have healthier relationships with technology and learn how to navigate technology safely, with parents and carers also needing to pass on knowledge about staying safe online. It may be that, despite being characterised as a generation that is digitally native, 14–24-year-olds would value more structured support around how to engage with digital technologies.

The reflections from the Youth Insight Group demonstrate how top-of-mind online harms are for young people. At the same time, their comments allude to feeling unprepared and under-supported in their participation in digital spaces, particularly when this participation feels increasingly compulsory for day-to-day activities (schoolwork, applying for jobs, etc.), as discussed elsewhere in this commentary. Embedded in the discussions was the complexity of accountability and the extent to which corporations, as well as individuals and family, should be responsible for their online safety – a notion that our desk-based research did not explicitly explore.

Considerations for further research

The research explored above highlights the challenges of studying the relationship between well-being and digital technologies in young people’s journeys to adulthood. While there are indications that technology can be a double-edged sword for some individuals, the conditions under which someone might experience more harms than opportunities, or vice versa, are understudied. Further research into the following would support the richness of this evidence base and support the development of governance tools and regulations around many digital technologies:

- How digital technologies exacerbate or interact with existing societal inequalities around young people's safety and well-being
- The intersectionality of experiences with digital technologies and the impacts of this on well-being
- How young people balance their expectations of autonomy and control with their expectations around accountability and safeguarding when they navigate online spaces, and the role of parents/carers in this balance at different life stages between 14 and 24.

Conclusion

Distilling observations predominantly from surveys with young people, we are able to provide an overview of some of the ways digital technologies intersect with young people's experiences of growing up.

A common thread across our findings is that young people's experiences with technology are heterogeneous. There is no unified experience of growing up online, with young people experiencing both benefits and harms from digital technologies, often to differing extents to one another. In particular, being part of communities that are often marginalised or minoritised appears to impact an individual's experiences with digital technology. This impact can be to both personal benefit and detriment, be that in finding safe spaces online to build a community, or in being more vulnerable to attacks on individual identity.

This synthesis has also highlighted some limitations of quantitative data around digital technologies and young people's experiences of growing up. Large-scale surveys, as reported here, are often conducted online, making it difficult to discern whether young people are completing them independently or with supervision from another adult in the household. The latter may leave some findings vulnerable to social desirability bias – particularly self-reported well-being measures and experiences of online harms.

These online surveys also inherently skew towards specific demographics of young people, such as those with reliable access to digital services, which can introduce further bias into the data. Sampling challenges – particularly around representation of different identity characteristics and sufficient sample sizes for analysis – mean survey data can offer limited insight into the experiences of those from more marginalised backgrounds, be that related to socio-economic factors or other aspects of social identity. In turn, there is limited data through which to examine experiences with digital technologies from an intersectional standpoint, which recognises that complex and often interlinked social factors can impact an individual's life experiences.

Measures of online behaviours and experiences can also lag behind developments in digital technologies. In this rapidly evolving field, the time needed to develop, test, deploy and analyse measures of online behaviours and experiences can become outdated quickly, posing a challenge for quantitative data collection. Our data commentary also shows that digital technologies are part of everyday life for many young people. Further research in this field may benefit from considering both young people's offline contexts and the impacts of technology on their offline lives. At the same time, the role of digital technologies in aspects of growing up like well-being and identity formation, is complex, pointing to the value of utilising qualitative research methods which may be better suited to unpack nebulous concepts and heterogeneous experiences.

Below we summarise key observations from across this commentary's areas of focus: access to devices and time use; relationships; identity; and well-being. This commentary has offered a brief exploration of these themes, focusing on key data points as a basis for discussion. We offer some reflections on where further research may offer additional insights. *Grown*

up? will explore in more depth some of the themes we have discussed above – subsequent publications will be made available on the [Grown up? website](#).

Access to devices and time use

We found that while smartphones are abundantly available to the majority of young people, other devices like tablets and large-screen devices are not. Social inequalities – particularly income inequalities – risk being exacerbated by unequal access to goods and services central to digital inclusion in society.

In terms of how young people are spending their time with digital technologies, the actual amount of time is highly variable from person to person. Broadly defined activities like browsing social media often take up a lot of young people's time with technology, but these categorisations offer little detail into both the motivations behind some technology use and the specificity of this time use. Young people engage differently with social media depending on the platforms they are using. For instance, some platforms are used primarily for interacting with people they know, while others are not. As such, a more detailed measure of time use would be useful in differentiating these different online experiences, and co-creation with young people may help in developing appropriate categorisations and measures for this. Similarly, young people from our Youth Insight Group referenced ways their time with digital devices changed as they grew older, relating to self-regulatory behaviours like limiting time on certain platforms and having strong digital skills to navigate online spaces responsibly.

Relationships

Digital technologies offer young people ways of sustaining relationships with people they know and building new connections with people they do not. Our data finds that many young people feel positive about the impacts of digital technologies in maintaining friendships, while others point out the benefits of technology for finding like-minded people and building a sense of community. These benefits may be particularly profound for those who have social anxieties or those experiencing vulnerability or marginalisation, and may be found through the offering of online spaces that feel safe.

At the same time, some young people voice concerns around how digital technologies might be changing social norms and the fabric of relationships. Further research into how behaviours to build and sustain relationships online are different from, or complementary to, behaviours young people do in person could add more clarity to the question of how digital technologies might be changing relationships as young people grow up.

Identity

The data suggests that digital technologies can be both identity-affirming and identity-attacking for many young people. These experiences seem to be particularly heightened for those from LGBTQ+ backgrounds, where digital technologies can both leave young people exposed to hurtful comments while at the same time opening up opportunities for them to learn more about their identities and offering different ways of expressing themselves. Further research in this field could delve into the ways in which young people's relationship with digital technology changes as they grow older, including the impacts this has on their sense of self.

Well-being

As discussed above, digital technologies can impact how young people feel about themselves. Particularly for those with poorer mental health, digital technologies like social media can exacerbate negative feelings and social comparisons with others. Concerns around well-being and social media have been at the centre of policy discourse about young people, with young people themselves highlighting its potentially negative impacts on their attention and general wellness. However, the data we analysed does not suggest a strong causal link between social media and poor mental health, highlighting the importance of thinking about technologies alongside, rather than in isolation to, the wider social contexts and circumstances in young people's lives.

Many young people have encountered potentially harmful content online. For some of these harms, exposures are gendered – with girls experiencing them more than boys, particularly around non-consensual sharing of nude or partially nude images. Some young people report taking active measures to protect themselves from negative experiences online, like setting time limits on specific applications and proactively taking breaks from digital devices. In the absence of stronger protections from harm online, these measures show the way young people self-regulate their digital lives, particularly at older ages. Reflections from young people highlight inequities in power between individuals and private companies, with some of the above-mentioned self-directed measures framed to reclaim individual power and agency. Further research and policy developments could benefit from addressing these inequities in power young people experience, embedding their voices into decision-making around the tools they engage with day-to-day in order to better support their overall well-being. In addition, further exploration of autonomy and control around digital behaviours – particularly self-regulatory behaviours to protect against harms – may offer more insight into how digital technologies may be impacting the journey to adulthood.

What's next

This data commentary shows that there is not a unified experience of what it means to grow up with digital technologies. Quantitative data offers broad insight into where some of this heterogeneity is – be that from the types of activities young people are doing online, differences in experiences of benefit and harm, or the role of sociodemographic factors. However, we recognise that unpacking the complexity of experiences in further detail requires different research methods. Upcoming research publications from the *Grown up?* programme will explore digital technologies and young people's lives using peer-research, interviews, and focus groups.

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Appendix 1: Youth Insight Group

Youth engagement forms a core element of the *Grown up?* programme. The Nuffield Foundation has commissioned Hopkins Van Mil to undertake a programme of youth engagement which includes two elements: the Youth Insight Group (YIG) and deep dive workshops. The YIG comprises 20 young people aged 14–24 from all four nations of the UK and from a diverse range of backgrounds. It meets nine times over the course of the project. The eight deep dives draw on different groups of young people across the UK to explore three topics: education to work, digital lives and mental health.

Reflections in this data commentary from the Youth Insight Group came from 16 members who were present for two online sessions in May 2025. The group explored the parts of their lives digital technologies interacted with, how they felt about the time they spent online, and the role of digital technologies on their well-being, relationships and sense of identity. The full report from this session can be accessed here [Link to be added once this report has been published].

Appendix 2: Longitudinal surveys with young people in the UK

Study: Understanding Society

About: [Understanding Society](#) is a UK longitudinal household survey. It captures information about people's economic and social circumstances, their attitudes, lifestyle, health, family relationships and their employment. It has two components: a main survey of individuals aged 16 and over, and a youth survey for individuals aged 10–15.

Access coverage:

The latest wave of their main survey covers access to the internet and access to digital devices, including desktops, laptops, smartphones, tablets, non-touchscreen phones, e-readers and smartwatches.

The latest wave of the youth survey asks about the devices young people have access to that either are their own, or they can borrow. Devices include smartphones, gaming consoles and laptops.

Time use coverage:

The main survey goes on to ask how often, from 'never' to 'every day' the respondent uses the internet for the following activities:

- Browsing websites
- Email
- Looking at social media
- Posting on social media
- Online shopping
- Online banking
- Gaming
- Streaming videos
- Streaming music.

The youth survey asks how many hours individuals spend on the devices they have access to, first on school days and then on weekends. Options range from 'none' to '7 or more hours' a day. It then asks about frequency of device use for watching programmes/videos/movies, video calling, playing games, schoolwork or studying, and posting pictures or videos from 'every day' to 'never'.

Study: Millennium Cohort Study

About: [The Millennium Cohort Study](#) is a UK longitudinal study of people born between 2000–2002. The current cohort is aged between 23 and 25.

The latest wave of the survey does not collect digital access measures. It does collect some information around digital time use, including frequency of doing the following on a normal weekday, with response options ranging from 'none' to '10 hours or more':

- Watching programmes or films
- Playing games, including online games
- Using social networking sites/apps or messaging sites/apps.

Study: Growing up in Scotland

About: [Growing up in Scotland](#) is a longitudinal study of young people born in 2005 in Scotland and their families. The cohort is currently aged 19/20.

The latest sweep of the data relating to 17–18-year-olds has a module on social media. It collects time use on social media, asking participants how often they use social media or

messaging apps once they have finished school, college or work. Options range from ‘not at all’ to ‘at least every half hour’.

Study: Growing up in the 2020s

About: [Growing up in the 2020s](#) is a new, nationally representative longitudinal study of school children in England run jointly by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, the Anna Freud Centre (a mental health charity) and Ipsos. It will include data on young people’s activities and time use, including detail on mobile phone use.

Appendix 3: Full descriptions of Figures

Figure 1: 14–24-year-olds’ access to smartphones, laptops and tablets

Overview

The bar chart shows the percentage of access to smartphones, laptops and tablets across ages. Smartphones access is notably higher. It starts at 92% (age 14) and 95% (age 15) before stabilising between 97% and 100% for the other ages. Laptops start at 81% and 83% (ages 14 and 15) before dropping to 71% and generally staying between 65% and 75% for other ages. Tablets start at 55% (age 14), dip to 47% (age 15), then rise to 58% (age 16) and trend down towards 46% at age 24.

Presentation

Each age year has a group of three vertical bars, one for each type of device. The height of the bar shows the percentage value.

Values

The percentage values presented in Figure 1:

Age	Smartphone	Laptop	Tablet
14	92%	81%	55%
15	95%	83%	47%
16	99%	71%	58%
17	100%	67%	55%
18	98%	73%	56%

19	99%	74%	48%
20	99%	69%	54%
21	99%	67%	51%
22	98%	60%	52%
23	97%	65%	50%
24	99%	69%	46%

This data is repeated, along with the source information, in the [full dataset](#).

Figure 2: Hours spent by 14–21-year-olds interacting with friends online on weekdays and weekends

Overview

The figure shows the time spent interacting online with friends across ages, which includes social media, gaming and apps. Each age is given separate data for weekdays and weekends. For almost all ages and times, time interacting online increases at the weekend. In general, 18-year-olds have the highest amount online, with ages above and below trending to lower amounts as age gap increases.

For almost all ages at all times, '1–3 hours' has the largest number of respondents (30–48%), followed by '4–6 hours' (14–40%) and 'less than an hour' (11–30%). 'Less than an hour' deviates from this pattern in two clear ways: First, on the weekend for 14–18-year-olds, 'less than an hour' drops to fourth place (11–17%), with '7+ hours' increasing to third (15–19%). Second, on weekdays for 14–16-year-olds, 'less than an hour' rises to second place (24–30%), with '4–6 hours' decreasing (14–24%). The category 'none' is smaller than the others (1–4%), with a jump to 7% for age 21.

Presentation

There are two charts: weekday and weekend. Each chart has horizontal bars for each age. The bars total 100% and are divided into the number of hours spent. The number of hours are grouped and ordered: none, less than an hour, 1–3 hours, 4–6 hours, 7+ hours.

Values

The percentage values presented in the weekday chart of Figure 2:

Age	None	Less than an hour	1 to 3 hours	4 to 6 hours	7 or more hours
14	4	30	44	14	7
15	3	24	47	21	5

16	2	24	40	24	10
17	1	15	48	16	20
18	1	14	39	32	13
19	1	22	48	20	9
20	3	20	41	24	11
21	7	24	41	20	8

The percentage values presented in the weekend chart of Figure 2:

Age	None	Less than an hour	1 to 3 hours	4 to 6 hours	7 or more hours
14	2	15	45	22	16
15	1	17	39	28	15
16	2	11	47	20	19
17	1	11	41	28	18
18	1	11	30	40	18
19	2	22	42	23	11
20	2	16	46	29	7
21	7	22	39	23	8

This data is repeated, along with the source information, in the [full dataset](#).

Figure 3: Percentage of 16–24-year-olds daily looking through and actively posting on social media

Overview

The bar chart shows the proportion of different ages looking at and posting on social media every day. Those looking at social media vary between 81% and 89%, while those posting vary between 11% and 25%. There is no strong trend of changing percentages as age changes.

Presentation

Each age has two vertical bars: 'looking' and 'posting'. The height of the bars shows the percentage value.

Values

The percentage values presented in Figure 3:

Age	Looking	Posting
16	81	18
17	85	14
18	89	25
19	84	16
20	87	20
21	81	18
22	84	19
23	81	11
24	88	17

This data is repeated, along with the source information, in the [full dataset](#).

Figure 4: Personal experience of 18–24-year-olds and 25+-year-olds with LLMs, by activity

Overview

The figure shows the proportion of the two age groups' use of, or willingness to use, LLMs for certain tasks. The proportion of 'yes' to using is notably higher (by two to three times) in those aged 18–24 than those aged 25+. The younger group had two categories in which more people had tried using LLMs (66% and 53%), but in all other cases across both groups, those answering 'yes' was lower than 50% (7–41%). In almost all cases, those answering 'no but open to using it' were greater than those answering 'no and I don't want to'.

Presentation

There are two charts: 18–24-year-olds and 25+-year-olds. Each chart has horizontal bars for each type of experience. The bars total 100% and are divided into responses given.

Values

The percentage values presented in the 18–24 chart of Figure 4:

Experience type	Yes	No, but open to using it	No and I don't want to	Don't know / prefer not to say
Search for answers/ recommendations	66	15	13	6
Educational purposes	53	25	16	6

Supporting everyday tasks (e.g., writing emails)	41	31	22	7
Entertainment (e.g., image/video/audio generation)	36	37	24	3
Supporting job applications	32	34	27	7
Guidance on issues (e.g., legal disputes, benefit claims, taxation)	13	40	40	6

The percentage values presented in the 25+ chart of Figure 4:

Experience type	Yes	No, but open to using it	No and I don't want to	Don't know / prefer not to say
Search for answers/recommendations	31	35	21	14
Educational purposes	19	42	29	10
Supporting everyday tasks (e.g., writing emails)	19	39	33	9
Entertainment (e.g., image/video/audio generation)	13	44	33	10
Supporting job applications	9	43	40	8
Guidance on issues (e.g., legal disputes, benefit claims, taxation)	7	49	34	10

This data is repeated, along with the source information, in the [full dataset](#).

Figure 5: Example weekend time use chart of a 14-year-old

Overview

The donut chart shows the time given to activities by an example 14-year-old. Screen time activities account for just over half of the time (12.7 hours). Online activities account for most of these (11.7 hours) and are separated into five categories.

Presentation

There are hour gradations around the circumference, with labelled sections for given categories. The centre of the donut has a large '24hrs'.

Values

The hour values given in Figure 5:

Activity	Hours spent
TikTok	3.1
Snapchat	1.5
YouTube	2.5
Safari	1
Other apps	3.6
TV	1
Non-screen time (awake)	3.3
Non-screen time (asleep)	8

The background to this example individual can be found on page 14 of the [Children’s Media Lives 2025 report](#).

Figure 6: Frequency of 14–21-year-olds getting together with friends online

Overview

The bar chart shows the regularity of getting together online across ages, with a general trend of higher usage among younger ages. The response ‘every day / almost every day’ is highest among ages 14 and 15 (46% and 48%) with the value generally decreasing as the age increases. Inversely, ‘less often / never’ has the lowest value for age 14 (13%) and increases as age increases (to 41%). The category ‘every day / almost every day’ remains higher than ‘less often / never’ until those aged 20 and 21. The middle two frequency categories are roughly similar through the ages.

Presentation

The bar has horizontal bars for each age. The bars total 100% and are divided into responses given.

Values

The percentage values presented in Figure 6:

Age	Every day / almost every day	Several times a week	About once a week	Less often / Never	Don’t know
14	46%	29%	12%	13%	0%
15	48%	23%	13%	15%	0%
16	34%	26%	21%	17%	1%
17	40%	27%	12%	20%	0%

18	38%	23%	13%	23%	2%
19	29%	21%	21%	29%	0%
20	25%	26%	21%	28%	0%
21	26%	21%	11%	41%	1%

This data is repeated, along with the source information, in the [full dataset](#).

Figure 7: Percentage of 16–21-year-olds that have a close friend they have not met in person

Overview

The bar chart shows the proportion of each age who have a close friend they have not met in person. There are two distinct groups. Ages 16–18 increase with age (29–32%). Then ages 19–21 show the same pattern, but at lower values (19–20%).

Presentation

The bar chart has vertical bars for each age. The height of the bars shows the percentage value.

Values

The percentage values presented in Figure 7:

Age	Percentage
16	29
17	32
18	32
19	19
20	20
21	20

This data is repeated, along with the source information, in the [full dataset](#).

Figure 8: Encounters with potentially AI-generated harms of 18–24-year-olds and 25+-year-olds

Overview

The figure shows the proportion of the two age groups' extent of encountering various harms online. Some things are in common to both age groups: First, with regard to frequency, 'a

few times' is generally the largest response across the harms (27–52%). Second, 'false or misleading information' is the most encountered harm, while 'content that promotes violence, abuse or hate' is least encountered.

There are also visible differences between the age groups: First, those aged 18–24 have relatively greater responses for 'many times' and 'a few times'. Second, those aged 25+ have a higher response rate for 'don't know/prefer not to say' and 'never' than ages 18–24, though the combined total for these two categories still usually remains under 50%.

Presentation

There are two charts: 18–24-year-olds and 25+-year-olds. Each chart has horizontal bars for each type of encounter. The bars total 100% and are divided into responses given.

Values

The percentage values presented in the 18–24-year-old chart of Figure 8:

Type of harm	Many times	A few times	Don't know/ prefer not to say	Never
Financial frauds or scams	27	43	14	15
False or misleading information	42	39	16	3
Deepfake image and/or audiovisual clips	33	52	7	7
Content that promotes violence, abuse or hate	20	45	17	19

The percentage values presented in the 25+-year-old chart of Figure 8:

Type of harm	Many times	A few times	Don't know/ prefer not to say	Never
Financial frauds or scams	23	34	26	17
False or misleading information	23	36	25	15
Deepfake image and/or audiovisual clips	18	38	21	23
Content that promotes violence, abuse or hate	11	27	27	36

This data is repeated, along with the source information, in the [full dataset](#).