Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood

Born connected: How Gen Z navigate their digital lives.

Hopkins Van Mil
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Contents

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Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) has for 20 years specialised in deliberative and participatory approaches. We create safe and trusted spaces for important discussions on the issues that matter to society and for which strategies for the future need further exploration. Our work brings people from across society together to examine contentious, emotionally engaging, and technically challenging topics on which a broad range of viewpoints need to be heard.

Introduction: The Deep Dive Workshops and the Youth Insight Group

The *Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood* programme was launched in Summer 2024. This programme dives into how young people aged 14 to 24 are making the journey to adulthood – and what this means for policy, research and wider society. It aims to fill the gaps that exist in understanding how Generation Z is experiencing this phase of life and how policies and systems can better support them throughout their journeys to adulthood.

As part of the Grown Up? programme the Nuffield Foundation commissioned specialist social research agency Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) to carry out two intersecting research and engagement projects with young people during the course of 2024-2025.

The first is running a Youth Insight Group (YIG) made up of twenty 14-24 year-olds from across all four UK nations, who meet in-person or online, nine times over the course of the *Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood* programme. The YIG work alongside HVM to shape and inform the second part of the programme; three sets of place-based Deep Dive Workshops (DDWs) with 14-24-year-olds.

These workshops take place in a diverse range of locations across the UK and focus on three specific topics within the programme: young peoples' experiences of education to work transitions, digital lives, and mental health and wellbeing. The findings from the second set of DDWs, on young peoples' digital lives, form the basis of this report.

Foreword by Youth Insight Group (YIG) members

Oh hey! Sorry you caught me playing my guitar! I am a Bard called G and I'm a Youth Insight Group member. This means I am one of many youths who create and shape workshops that help educate people about what young people really think and what we are concerned about. We discuss important topics like this research paper on digital lives.

I myself have been involved in the YIG by talking about my experiences and discussing big topics with other YIG members. This involves understanding their perspectives on topics including Digital Lives. I really enjoy creating, talking to others, and analysing data in these workshops as it makes me feel I am doing something that actually matters and will affect out futures.

This report matters because it is a looking glass into what we go through online – how we can have endless connections yet also be so lonely. I believe that we have a forced reliability with the Internet; everything is online and made to catch your attention which is why you can easily spend hours watching videos or reading posts! It is a way to communicate, to create and thrive, but also to isolate and make life seem much more dull. I want us to thrive not only in our digital kingdoms but also our real kingdoms!

So let's not let this report gather dust in some silent archive. These young voices are not just random data points. This is a choir of voices who have created virtual worlds most only visit. Let us let their wisdom be your blueprint and see how you can help.

Foreword contribution by YIG member Issy.

My name is Amani, and I am part of the Youth Insights Group (YIG). Over the past few months, I have worked with other young people to design and analyse the Digital Lives workshops. This set of deep dive workshops were not just about technology — they were about growing up in a world where digital life is inseparable from everyday life. For me, taking part has been an opportunity to step back and ask: what does it really mean to come of age in a space that is always connected?

For my generation, the digital world is not a tool we switch on and off. It is where we build friendships, learn, express ourselves, and imagine our futures. It is full of possibility — but it is also full of pressure. The constant comparisons. The loss of privacy. The feeling that you must always be visible, always performing, never quite enough. These are not side notes to our lives; they shape our confidence, our wellbeing, and our sense of belonging. In the workshops, what struck me most was the honesty. Behind every conversation was a story of resilience, of creativity, but also of struggle. That is why this report matters. It goes beyond headlines and statistics to bring forward the real voices of young people. It reveals both the opportunities we value and the challenges we carry — and it shows that young people are not passive bystanders in digital spaces. We are analysts, innovators, and problem-solvers in our own right. To policymakers and decision-makers: if you want digital spaces that are safe, fair, and empowering, you cannot design them without us. Too often, choices about young people's futures are made in rooms where no young person is present. This report is proof that we have the insight, courage, and imagination to be part of the solution. The digital world is shaping who we are and who we will become. If you truly want to understand it — and to build a future where young people can thrive — start by listening to the voices captured here.

Foreword contribution by YIG member Amani

Executive Summary

About the *Digital Lives* Deep Dive Workshops

The Nuffield Foundation commissioned specialist social research agency Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) to carry out a set of DDWs exploring the journey of young people on the topics of education to work, digital lives, and mental health and wellbeing. In parallel, HVM were also asked by the Nuffield Foundation to convene a Youth Insight Group (YIG), made up of twenty 14-24 year olds from across the four nations. YIG members helped to shape the content and format of the workshops, and reflected on the findings. These intersecting projects are part of the Nuffield Foundation's *Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood* programme. The report on the education to work DDWs was published by the Nuffield Foundation in May 2025. This report shares the findings from the second DDWs on digital lives.

Two 3-hour online DDW workshops were held, one with 15 participants from across the UK and a second with 15 participants from the West Midlands. Participants, aged 14-24, came from a range of social backgrounds and ethnicities and included those with long-term mental and physical health conditions. Young people from rural as well as urban communities were included in the groups.

Findings from the *Digital Lives* Deep Dive Workshops

Young people identified six areas where action on digital lives is needed.

1. There is currently no off switch for a GenZ's digital life – but there should be.
2. Clear and consistent rules on in-school phone use are called for, to provide young people with rare digital-free time.
3. It should be acknowledged by society that there are tensions in how young people feel about their digital lives which can affect their wellbeing and mental health.
4. Decision-makers should tackle the root causes of key social ills such as racism and misogyny – not use social media as a scapegoat for them.
5. There is a complexity in living digitally which can be simultaneously connecting and isolating – young people should be protected and supported as they navigate this.
6. The need to encourage inter-generational learning on the benefits and harms of digital technologies throughout life, staying on top of digital developments.

Digital days in the life

Young people find they are digitally connected throughout the day. This begins with "plugging themselves in" on waking up and continues throughout the day on a range of devices and equipment, as they, for example:

- Listen to music
- Use their laptops – for exercise, study, recreation, gaming
- Check their phones, receive notifications, scrolling through social media posts
- Study using multiple screens
- Travel – digital tickets
- Watch videos, films and TV on a range of devices.

Digital lives evolve alongside milestones in education and work

Participants shared their experience of digital lives in their younger years revolving around entertainment and family life, often in shared spaces in their homes. Being given a smartphone, in the final years of primary school or first years of secondary school was seen as an important milestone, bringing a more individual element to digital life. They said that at this stage, their digital lives still had parental involvement with rules being set on phone use. The start of secondary school was seen as a gear change for many in terms of how many devices they use and for what purpose. At this point, most felt under pressure to fit in through smartphone and social media use. This coincided with parental controls, and parental involvement, trailing off.

The DDW groups felt there were some differences in digital lives in the secondary school years compared to their primary/pre-school years:

- Younger female participants felt their digital connections limited their playfulness and physical activity in their secondary school years
- Conversely several young male participants described these years as being physically active and therefore less focused on digital connections
- Some of those in rural areas said they started using smartphones later, as they had more opportunity to spend time outside

As young people start sixth form, college and university they report their digital lives change. Their social media use, for example, becomes less compulsive and peer-pressure driven.

In relation to studying, participants reflected on the shift to using online sources, rather than physical books, placing a burden on them to carefully check the reliability of information being used for their studies which hadn't existed before. Participants also reported using AI to help with research, organisation and structuring their ideas – with particular benefits for neurodivergent participants. However, they highlighted the risks in an over-dependence on AI harming their ability to learn and structure their thoughts independently.

The Covid-19 pandemic was seen by participants as a pivotal moment in their digital lives. This was evident in the sudden shift to online learning, and a dependence on social media and video tools in lockdowns for keeping in touch with friends they couldn't see in person.

Wellbeing and mental health

Participants' feelings about their digital lives are characterised by a series of tensions which affect their mental health and wellbeing. They describe a constant balancing act between the helpful aspects of digital life, and feelings of unease, frustration, guilt or anxiety which can result from feeling they have limited choice and control over the influence of digital technology on their lives.

Convenience was seen as a key benefit by many, with access to everything needed during the day on your smartphone: communication, entertainment – including escapism and relaxation, and practical help.

On the flip side the constant presence of a screen was seen by many as a problem: potentially addictive, reducing attention spans, and with the risk of exposure to judgement, comparison, and expectations of 24/7 availability when they post on social media.

Older participants add that online advertising has become all-pervasive, deceiving, unregulated or inappropriate. They reported that amongst their peers it has contributed to harms including body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and risk-taking with unhealthy products or cosmetic procedures.

News and the information society were discussed as a mixed blessing. Having immediate access to information means life is endlessly stimulating and frequently enriching, with learning opportunities aplenty. Older participants spoke of the importance of keeping up with the news and what is going on around the world. However, they also felt that a constant stream of negative online news can be damaging to mental health, with feelings of anxiety on hearing bad news over which they have no control or influence.

Participants reflected on mental health in the context of an over-stretched NHS, where appointments are hard to obtain. Being able to search the Internet for health information was seen by many as a benefit – giving access to advice and shared experiences quickly. However, it was, at the same time, seen as potentially harmful: can the advice be trusted? Does having online information generate even greater anxiety and poor mental health?

Participants share that they can hold contradictory feelings about digital technologies at the same time. For example, it is equally true for them that these platforms, tools and resources can:

• Help expand connections, knowledge and enrich their real-world hobbies	*Whilst also*	• Narrowing their experiences with digital life, replacing the breadth of tangible experience that used to be, or could be, part of their lives.
• Lead to people feeling highly connected with a rich digital life	*Whilst also*	• Feeling isolated and extremely lonely.

Participants call for wellbeing and mental health services to be better equipped to support young people navigating these contradictory feelings and this unique form of loneliness.

Digital agency

Participants stress their desire to have digital agency and to make efforts to proactively control the time they spend online and make digital technologies work for their individual growing up journey.

Practical ways in which participants said they make digital technologies work for them include:

- Turning social media and newsfeed notifications off
- Using timings on apps
- Using ‘strict’ apps that impose a fine if you try and use social media during a restricted period
- Personally scheduling technology/screen-free time
- Informal agreements with friends to keep phones on silent during time spent catching up together in-person
- Learning how to ‘manipulate’ algorithms to ensure they only see what they want to see online and on social media
- Proactively engaging with the development of these technologies and remaining astute as to how developers use mechanisms to make their technologies appealing to young people.

Self-education on the impacts of a digital life is an important way in which young people assert their agency over digital technology. For many this includes understanding the potential impacts of, for example, scrolling on TikTok or Instagram reels, and the potential for this to become addictive. It also includes understanding how much they were spending because of targeted social media advertising and cutting back on the automatic renewal of some app subscriptions.

Such discussions led to some participants concluding that digital technology is encouraging financial irresponsibility in young people. They believe more support is needed to prevent this leading to lifelong unhealthy habits in relation to spending and finances.

Building relationships online

Opportunities for digital tools to help young people connect with others who share their interests is important in tackling loneliness and building self-esteem in a formative period. Some participants spoke of embarrassment at not being able to be their true selves until they had found online communities who shared their interests, hobbies and experiences. Several participants said they would not have met significant people in their lives including romantic partners and close friends had it not been for social media messaging. At the same time, some participants reflected on the need to ‘sell’ yourself online, putting additional strain and pressure on life online. They felt this was particularly problematic in a time when you are still forming an individual identity.

Another key complexity highlighted by participants is that building relationships in the digital space feels like an essential part of a young person’s life. However, it can also feel deeply unsafe and unregulated. Participants refer to fake profiles and their belief that creepy behaviour, extreme views, or inappropriate mixing of ages would be much more obvious and visible in the physical world.

A discussion thread in all groups was the constant possibility of coming across people or content which is harmful simply by chance, due to the lack of controls, ineffective moderation, and lack of regulation in the online space.

Some participants appreciated the appeal of chatting to an AI bot 24/7 about anything, at any time, and receiving an instant reply. However, they are concerned about dependence on these conversations. They fear that young people might come to rely on them when what they need is emotional *human* support.

Young people identified six areas where action on digital lives is needed:

1. There is currently no off switch for a GenZ's digital life – but there should be.
2. Clear and consistent rules on in-school phone use are called for, to provide young people with rare digital-free time.
3. It should be acknowledged by society that there are tensions in how young people feel about their digital lives which can affect their wellbeing and mental health.
4. Decision-makers should tackle the root causes of key social ills such as racism and misogyny – not use social media as a scapegoat for them.
5. There is a complexity in living digitally which can be simultaneously connecting and isolating – young people should be protected and supported as they navigate this.
6. To encourage inter-generational learning on the benefits and harms of digital technologies throughout life, staying on top of digital developments.

1. About the Deep Dive Workshops

This report contains findings from the second set of Deep Dive Workshops (DDWs) delivered by the specialist social research agency Hopkins Van Mil as part of the Nuffield Foundation's *Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood* programme. These DDWs explored the topic of 'digital lives'.

Grown up? Journeys to adulthood focuses on the 8.6 million young people in the UK between the ages of 14 and 24 – a time when they face critical decisions that shape their futures. The programme is working with young people to understand when and how they make key choices and investigate how the landscape of adulthood is evolving. As an exploratory programme, *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood* aims to provide an overview of the key issues and debates across four themes, while identifying important questions that future research and innovative practice should address.

The first DDWs took place in Spring 2025 and focused on the theme of 'education to work'. The full report sharing findings from these workshops can be read here. The second set of DDWs (the focus of this report), exploring the 'digital lives' topic, took place in June 2025. The final set of DDWs will take place in autumn 2025 on the topic of 'wellbeing and mental health'.

1.1 Where did the workshops take place?

Both 'digital lives' workshops took place online, using Zoom. It was agreed that an online format was appropriate considering that the focus of the discussion was living online. This format also allowed us to bring together young people living in rural areas across the UK for the first workshop. Figure 1 shows the geographical distribution of participants from this first 'digital lives' workshop.

Figure 1: geographical distribution of participants in the first of the digital lives DDWs

Participants in the second of the digital lives workshops all resided in the West Midlands. This added to the UK spread across all of the Deep Dive workshops and allowed us to recruit from rural and urban areas from diverse populations.

1.2 Who took part?

Both workshops were attended by 15 young people. HVM worked with their recruitment partners Acumen Fieldwork to recruit both cohorts. A recruitment specification was provided that required range across gender; age; disability; those with long-term (physical and/ or mental) health conditions; and socio-economic situations.

Each workshop was attended by two experienced HVM facilitators as well as a member of the HVM event support team. A member of the Nuffield Foundation team was also present at each workshop.

Each workshop cohort was split into two smaller groups, one for older participants (19-24) and another for younger participants (14-18). It was decided that this was an appropriate way of working due to the breadth of our age categories and the differences in what daily life involves for a young person at the lower vs. upper end of this range.

1.3 Workshop process

The workshops lasted three hours. All participants received a £70 thank you payment for attending. The workshops involved a combination of short presentations and facilitated small-group discussions.

The table below presents an overview of the workshop process. Both DDWs followed the same process.

Time	Activity
11:00	Welcome and introductions Menti.com interactive activity
11:10	Ada Lovelace Institute short presentation about their work and interest in this topic
11:15	Small group discussions – a day in our digital lives
12:05	Break
12:15	Small group discussions – digital relationships and identity
12:45	Lunch
13:10	Small group discussion – wellbeing, time online and agency
13:50	Evaluation activity
14:00	Thank you and goodbye

HVM facilitators audio recorded each of their small group discussions. After the workshops, these audio recordings were transcribed. During the workshops facilitators also captured discussions using digital post-it notes and online whiteboards. This report has been written by the same HVM team members who facilitated the DDWs. The writing team used both flipcharts and transcriptions in their thematic analysis.

1.4 Relationship between the DDWs and the YIG

Before these DDWs the YIG, as project collaborators, helped to shape the workshop process, including workshop format and discussion questions. After the Deep Dive Workshops, the YIG helped to:

1. Reflect on the thematic analysis of DDW findings conducted by the HVM team
2. Share the findings

The YIG was involved in a similar way in the first set of Deep Dive Workshops (see their digital zine reflecting on education to work workshop findings) and will be again looking ahead to the third set.

2. Findings from the Deep Dive workshops

2.1 Digital days in the life

Participants shared that their “digital life” is their actual life starting from the moment they wake up, to lying in bed at night unable to sleep having been living digitally all day. These are set out in Figure 2 with drawings[1] to illustrate the daily journey as participants described it in the workshops.

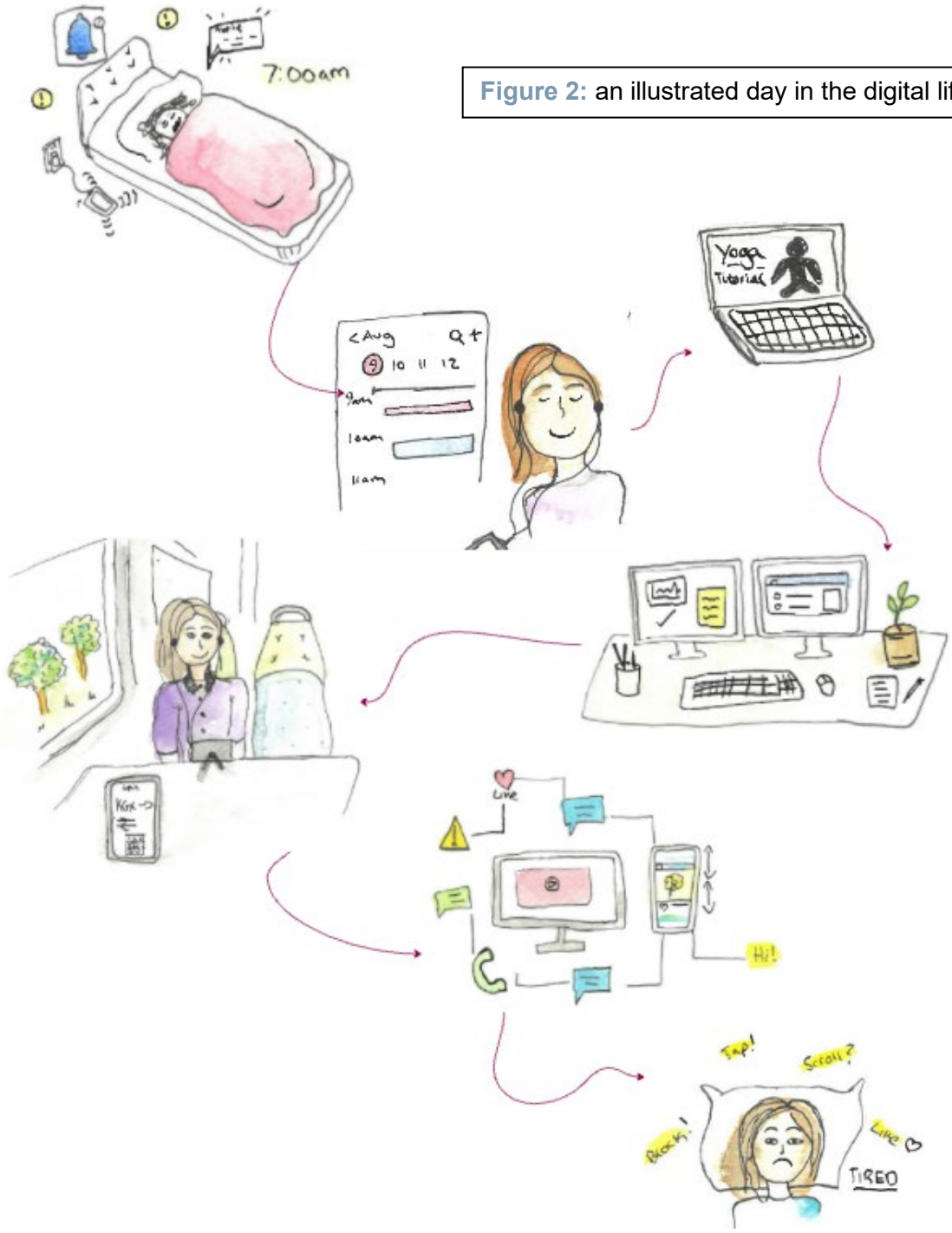

Figure 2: an illustrated day in the digital life

[1] Illustrations drawn from participants’ words by Lydia Hopkins design.

2.2 Digital lives evolve alongside milestones in education and work

During primary school years, digital life moves from family to individual use

As children, many participants' digital lives revolved around entertainment as part of family life. They described gaming or watching Netflix and YouTube, with siblings or the family, often in shared spaces in the house.

> *"It was Moshi Monsters, Mario Kart Wii, online card games, me and my sister, we used to play for hours on end. We'd come home from school and be sat in front of the TV, playing, arguing over it, it sort of took over. It brought us together. It was a social thing for us."* Older participant, Rural workshop

Several participants also described their parents telling them to entertain themselves on screens because they need to work or keep noise to a minimum.

> *"When you're bored or you're misbehaving as a kid, it's just to shut you up. It's the norm now, watch YouTube and be quiet. I know people who work, who have kids, and they just sat in front of a tablet the whole day. That's the way it's going with most parents."* Older participant, Rural workshop

Many participants shared that they were given smartphones as they gained independence towards their final years at primary school, or in the first year of secondary school, at the age of ten or eleven. They reported that this brought a more individual element to digital life, but that parents were still involved. There were caveats such as not being allowed phones in bedrooms at night to protect sleep, not being allowed to use social media platforms such as TikTok or Snapchat, or parents keeping an eye on content and chats.

Secondary school brings a steep increase in smartphone and social media use

When starting secondary school, participants in all groups said they felt under pressure to make new friends and fit in through smartphone and social media use, which quickly became an ever-present part of everyday life.

> *"School life definitely puts you more on devices because you want to do what everyone else is doing."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

This coincided with parental controls trailing off, and parents only becoming involved if contacted by school. Some participants described feeling overwhelmed, or suddenly being exposed to bullying or inappropriate content, before knowing how to navigate or avoid it.

> *"Signing up to social media was a big milestone. Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit. Twitter is the worst, it's so unregulated. You just see the most horrific things you could think of. You do get exposed to that at a young age."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

Some participants described learning through experience to share less on social media as they moved through secondary school:

"I went through a little breakup a while ago that messed up my trust issues and since then, I've just been a lot more private with my life, so now I don't really tell people as much as I used to. I don't share my location, only with close friends and family." Younger participant, Rural workshop

Messages for decision makers - on in-school phone use

Rules around phone use in schools are new, variable and often not strictly enforced. Participants want decision makers to understand how phone use rules are currently operating in schools and reflect carefully on future related legislation.

Younger participants described a variety of ever-changing situations in their schools. Some schools enforce outright bans with all phones being handed in on arrival. Other participants talk about strict rules on paper which are not consistently enforced, and a few are simply discouraged from using phones unless they are needed in lessons.

Participants shared that schools which used to strictly enforce bans are no longer doing so.

> *"My school was one of the first to get rid of phones. It was in the papers. Everyone was really strict at the start. And then it faded - now your phone will go off and they don't care. They just tell you to put it back in your bag, they used to send you out."* Younger participant, Rural workshop

> *"We used to be allowed them at school and use them at lunch and stuff. But then they were saying, "You're spending too much time on your phones and not talking to each other at break." So now we can't use them at all unless for lessons and research. We don't get them taken off us or anything."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

Participants have mixed feelings around this, with many saying restrictions are frustrating, but that clear phone bans are - or would be - beneficial to provide them with rare digital-free time.

Gender can influence the extent of digital immersion at secondary school

Younger female participants emphasised the importance of constant online communication with friends (See also Chapter 2.5 on Relationships). They said this coincides with rising feelings of judgement and self-consciousness as they move into adolescence, which limits their playfulness and physical activity.

In contrast, several male participants described spending time with friends playing football and other sports, which naturally kept them away from screens.

> *"I was watching year 11 play football the other day and I was, "Oh the boys are still running around all happy and then the girls are just there sat in the corner on our phones." The older you get the more you get judged."* Younger participant, Rural workshop

Place can influence the timing of smartphone uptake

A few participants who grew up in rural areas and had the opportunity to spend a lot of time outside, started using smartphones later into secondary school.

> *"I didn't get a phone till I was 14 because of where I live, in the countryside. I had mates my age who lived around here, we had fields and rivers, we could cycle to a beach, so there wasn't any need to be sitting indoors, it didn't matter if it was raining, we'd be outside doing something. It wasn't until I became a teenager that I had a digital world. And it was quite overwhelming to be honest."* Older participant, Rural workshop

Using more online information sources saves time whilst studying but brings a burden of fact-checking

Several participants mentioned reading and using physical books more during primary school age. As they moved through secondary school the norm became to use more digital information sources, where assessing the reliability of information became their responsibility.

> *"I remember being in primary school and having encyclopaedias and stuff. Back then, information had to be right to be given to people. Now with misinformation you have to be so discerning to know what is right and what isn't, people can say anything now."* Older participant, Rural workshop

AI is changing the way participants study

Platforms like ChatGPT help with research, organisation and structuring ideas, which, they reported, is especially valuable for neurodivergent participants. A few participants said they would use AI to write entire essays, and that it was seen as cool to use this new tool to save time or cheat. Others were conscious of using AI ethically, but some said it was a challenge to stop themselves from overusing it.

> *"I was going to say how much AI has changed the way I revise. I've got ADD so I find it really hard to sit down and focus myself on revision. Formatting the information will take up all of my revision time, so now I can use AI to put it into a way that I understand. I can use it as a tool, you know, ethically."* Older participant, Rural workshop

> *"I can get ChatGPT to write me an essay that I can submit to school and they're not going to know any different if I add some spelling mistakes."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

> *"AI was cool at the beginning, but then people are becoming so reliant on it, it's actually something that's quite hard to wean yourself off of."* Older participant, Rural workshop

At college and university, several participants became more discerning about their digital lives

Several participants described a more deliberate and less compulsive and peer-pressure driven approach to their digital life in sixth form or university. Studies and work

they have actively chosen define how they spend their time on screens, and there is less pressure to keep up with online trends or people outside their chosen groups of friends.

> *"In sixth form and college, you're there because you want to be there, you've picked the course you want to do so I'm not going to just sit on my phone and waste time."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

> *"When I have breaks I don't really use any technology at all because I think it's just nice to get away and go on a walk. When I don't need to be on I don't really use it, but when I do it's usually for university stuff."* Older participant, Rural workshop

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the transition to digital life

Older participants described a sudden shift towards online learning and the use of digital tools during the pandemic, some of which has remained in place. Lockdowns also intensified the use of social media for many participants; it was essential for keeping in touch with friends they couldn't see in person.

A transformation in young people's experience of starting work
The first set of DDWs focused on how young people today experience the transition from education to work. Findings from these workshops included how technology has transformed how young people perceive work. Participants in these second DDWs similarly emphasised the extent to which technology has shaped their attitudes to work. Some reflected on how at this stage of their growing up journey, because of starting to use platforms such as LinkedIn, digital technology quite suddenly became less "just for fun". Some shared their feelings of guilt when spending time online doing non work-related activities, because,

> *"the opportunity is right in front of me to do some career development stuff, all the information is there, but I just can't bring myself to do anything. It's much easier to keep scrolling".* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

2.3 Wellbeing and mental health

Participants' feelings about their digital lives are characterised by a series of tensions which affect their wellbeing and mental health.
Many describe being caught in a constant balancing act between the helpful aspects of digital life, and their negative counterparts. As well as being very aware of the more extreme harms that make the headlines, participants across all groups experience an everyday undercurrent of unease, frustration, guilt or anxiety. They believe this is due to being forced to operate through digital platforms and tools.

> *"I try to stay off my phone because I'm a lot happier when I'm not on it. I'm more productive and I read more. But I struggle to stay off it because I like to know what's happening and stay in the loop."* Younger participant, Rural workshop

> *"Everyone hates Snapchat, everyone knows it's bad for them, but people use it because what else are you meant to talk on? If you don't have Snapchat, you'd be left out so much, and you're genuinely bullied. It's just how life is. I would love*

to live in the older generation where digital wasn't a thing, that'd be amazing." Younger participant, Rural workshop

Figure 3: YIG member output created during the YIG 6 meeting – a clay model of a mobile phone stretched between the tensions of reality and a digital life.

Digital tools are endlessly fun, fast and convenient to use, but this can contribute to overuse, addiction, sleep problems and shortened concentration spans

Across all groups, participants talked about the convenience of having everything in one place on a smartphone. Their phones are constant companions providing instant communication, entertainment and practical help. Many talked about digital devices in general providing endless entertainment, so they always have something to do and never feel bored.

Many also spoke about the benefit to their wellbeing of the escapism and relaxation provided by online games or TV. Several participants also mentioned using their smart phones or watches for wellbeing related tools such as meditation apps, exercise videos or calorie trackers.

"There's different parts of the Apple Watch. I can track calories and track all my exercises. And that really helps me. There's this thing called Mindful, you can take a minute, and it tells you when to have calming down time." Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Equally, participants across all groups spoke about the constant presence of screens across every aspect of their lives, making them hard to escape or put down. This difficulty is compounded by addictive social media platforms, especially on smartphones, which participants in all groups said waste their time, lead to compulsive behaviour, or affect their sleep. This results in regular feelings of guilt, regret and a lack of control (See Chapter 2.3 on digital agency for how participants navigate this).

"It's just like an addictive substance, if you're constantly seeing stimulating videos, and then something's funny, and then you keep scrolling, scrolling, when you wake up, you want to have that dopamine hit." Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Figure 4: YIG member output created during the YIG 6 meeting – drawing showing a young person being 'haunted' by notifications and the demands of a digital life

"Everyone compares their screen time and it's always absolutely mental. It makes you feel guilty." Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

"Before you know it, you've been three hours on TikTok and you feel mentally drained and think, why have I done that? It takes a lot of your life away if you let it." Older participant, Rural workshop

"It affects my sleeping pattern a lot. There'll be times I just get so distracted, messaging friends and I go to sleep really late. When I can't fall asleep, I'll go on TikTok for a bit and then stay on it for ages. When you're on TikTok for too long, it gets really depressing afterwards because you're just sitting there." Younger participant, Rural workshop

Many participants expressed concern about having lost their ability to focus or concentrate for extended periods, as a result of constant exposure to the fast-pace and attention-grabbing nature of online content

"Attention spans are just so terrible now. I remember back when I used to read several books at a time. Now it's such a feat if someone reads 10 pages in a

day. And in music where songs are now two minutes. Back then it was four minute songs. There is this psychological thing now that I need it now and I need it quick." Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Many participants are motivated to post or message regularly, but this exposes them to judgement, comparison and expectations of 24/7 availability

Younger female participants in particular, said they value the ease of keeping in touch constantly through social media and sharing what's going on in their lives. They explain this is particularly important for their friendships, and there is an expectation to have a constant online presence.

> *"You have to post so people know who you are or to make yourself look good. Or to always keep your phone on you and talk to people. Because with girls, if you don't talk to people online, then at school, other people are getting closer."* Younger participant, Rural workshop

However, they believe this posting or messaging exposes them to others' opinions and judgements. Participants of all ages say comments, or the anticipation of reactions, can create anxiety and insecurities.

> *"When you post something and then you feel on edge all the time, you wonder what people's reaction is going to be. You feel like you're exposed to things, everyone's always judging what you're doing, whatever you put online, no matter how good it is, someone always has something bad to say."* Older participant, Rural workshop

Some participants describe a simultaneous pressure to post often and quickly, and to be extremely careful about what they say, particularly during secondary school, for fear of bullying and a permanent record of their actions.

Figure 5: YIG member output created during the YIG 6 meeting – collage highlighting the different pressures young people experience because of digital technology.

> *“You have to be careful of what you say, before you say something, think of the outcome of later events. It stays online forever, you can't just erase everything.”* Younger participant, Rural workshop

Many participants also say they feel under pressure to be accessible, check their phones and keep in touch all the time so as not to offend or lose touch with anyone.

> *“It's anxiety all the time that you have to have your phone on your hip. You have to check it all the time and you're thinking, is someone messaging me? Or if I don't check it, it's, “Have I ignored someone?””* Older participant, Rural workshop

Participants suggested that as they get older, the feeling that they need to be constantly available moves from a social to work-related anxiety. They describe how every aspect of their lives has a digital element, often on the same devices, including work, studies, life admin and socialising. This combination makes it very difficult to separate work from leisure and to truly switch off and relax.

> *“I feel I'm accessible 24/7. Someone can always message me or call me no matter where I am or what I'm doing. And that creates a lot of anxiety.”* Older participant, Rural workshop

Living with constant sources of comparison is something many participants said affects their health or the health of people they know. They explained that being regularly exposed to curated online lifestyles and personas, or even just friends posting their highlights, can compound loneliness and anxiety. They said this is especially true amongst younger people who are less secure in their identities.

> *“Social media does influence your mental health especially when you're growing up, it can make you feel anxious and depressed because you compare yourself, you don't really have your own identity and you're trying to figure everything out.”* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

> *“You're thinking everyone else is better looking than you, everyone else is fitter than you, and everyone else is doing better than you financially, which is not true. You don't even realise that you're comparing yourself to the top 1% of the world.”* Older participant, Rural workshop

Older participants explained that increasingly sophisticated online advertising, with its amplification of impossible beauty standards, has become all pervasive. They say advertising, particularly on social media, often seems fabricated, unregulated or inappropriate. They reported that amongst their peers it has contributed to body dysmorphia, eating disorders or taking risks with unhealthy products or cosmetic procedures.

> *“They should be more aware about the physical effects on our bodies - I started using sunbeds when I was, like, 16. You have to be 18 to use them. And then there's also a lot about diet and gym, I know people that have had eating disorders from the influence of social media.”* Older participant, Rural workshop

"Especially ads in fitness and beauty content, you would have content creators just lying blindly doing anything possible to basically advertise their products." Older participant, Rural workshop

"I've got a family member who's seen all the girls on Instagram, and people on there advertising their business to get your teeth done in Turkey. She's gone and had it done because she's seen it online and everyone's got it. Social media is so powerful and dangerous for young girls, it's like get your teeth done or your lips and all sorts." Older participant, Rural workshop

Messages for decision makers - on social media

Social media is often used as a scapegoat for causing societal issues that have existed since long before the digital age.

Participants reflected on that fact that the media often identifies social media as the root cause of problematic societal issues such as misogyny and racism. They call for decision makers to challenge their own assumptions that social media is the culprit of all society's ills. They believe this is distracting from tackling the true root causes of the issues and working effectively to reduce the impact of them.

"Social media serves, as an amplification of a lot of issues rather than being the sole issue, even though people treat it as the sole issue. For example, misogyny has become such a problem. It's just become normalised. If you speak to old people, a lot of them have views on women, and it's just normal to them, but it's actually really inappropriate. And people just treat it like it's a social media issue today, but really it has to be tackled on the outside too and then think about how it intersects with social media rather than being, "Oh, it's social media that's causing this." I just think having both conversations (is important) in person and outside before just focusing on social media." Older participant, Rural workshop

Information, news and opportunities are stimulating and important, but this can cause overwhelm or distress

Immediate access to information and opportunities mean digital life is endlessly stimulating, and many participants spoke about learning being an important facet of their time online. Older participants in particular spoke about the importance of keeping up with news and what is going on across the world.

"I see a lot of good opportunities, and I learn things online. Like even this opportunity, I found it on social media (…) Something like TikTok, the plus of it is I think it's been such a great discovery tool. I think a lot of people have been able to get such great opportunities and reach people because of TikTok." Older participant, Rural workshop

Whilst sharing the value in this immediate access, they equally described how damaging a constant stream of negative online news can be to their mental health. They talked about being desensitised to violence and feeling anxious and depressed by hearing bad news that they have no control over.

"It's one of the first times in history that a war has been live streamed, with Ukraine and what's going on in the Middle East. It's really hard to escape. Especially when I was younger, I was desensitised pretty quickly because of the amount of digital content of violence." Older participant, Rural workshop

"I like to get both sides of every conflict. But a lot of the stuff you see on there really impacted my mental health. It's hard to compartmentalise what is going on in the world and the fact that you can't do anything about it." Older participant, Rural workshop

The internet plugs a gap in stretched health services, but online information can lead to self-diagnosis and health anxiety

In a context where GP appointments and mental health services are often insufficient and hard to come by, some participants spoke about how helpful it is to quickly find health-related information online, as well as online communities where people are going through similar experiences.

"It's hard to book a doctor's appointment, you have to wait months. I go on TikTok and I do my own research, you find people in the same boat. I've had a few mental health problems recently. I was too daunted to speak about it. Hearing someone speak about these issues on social media, does help you to face it and go, "I think I can do something about it as well." You feel less lonely. You've got this community." Older participant, West Midlands workshop

"There's a lot of health professionals on TikTok. Do you trust them? I don't know. But I don't know if I'd even trust a doctor that much anymore when they're passing me off and they're not really listening to what I'm saying." Older participant, West Midlands workshop

But some participants also shared their experiences of endless online health information itself generating anxiety and poor mental health

"I was ill quite a lot the beginning of this year and just constantly putting things in google. I had so much in my mind when I went to the hospital, and the doctor there was saying, "I think that you're actually having panic attacks from reading all the information." You feel your symptoms just get worse and worse just reading about all these possibilities." Older participant, West Midlands workshop

"When I was younger and I first started going on social media, I was more gullible. I saw myself as feeling sadder when I was on TikTok. I'd hear different stories about abuse and trauma, then I'd start internalising all that, and saying to myself, "Maybe I'm feeling like this too." I went down a bad cycle." Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Digital life can enrich 'real' life - or diminish it

For young people who have a well-established interest or passion, digital tools can help them expand their connections, knowledge, and enrich or enable their real-world hobbies (See Chapter 2.5 on relationships). But some participants describe their lives narrowing as a result of digital life replacing the breadth of tangible, physical experiences that used to be part of their lives.

"Digital life was supposed to be one section of our lives, but now everything is moving virtually, so now it looks like we don't even have a real life anymore, it's getting out of hand." Older participant, Rural workshop

"You have to go out of your way to do things that aren't digital. I think there's just nothing else to do really." Older participant, Rural workshop

Messages for decision makers - on isolation

Digital technology-induced loneliness is isolating the younger generation and mental health services need to be aware of this

Participants emphasised that living digitally often leads to young people simultaneously feeling hyper-connected and extremely lonely. This is a complex mix of contradictory emotions and very challenging to navigate, especially when also trying to make sense of other aspects of growing up. Participants feel that older generations often struggle to understand how it is possible to experience such different emotions simultaneously and thus cannot offer the right support to young people who are feeling this way. Participants see significant need for mental health and wellbeing services to be well-equipped to support young people experiencing these contradictory feelings, and this unique type of loneliness.

2.4 Digital agency

Participants shared their frustration in the assumption that all young people are happy to accept a digital reality where they lose control of the time they spend online and, as they described it, are "*controlled*" by digital technology companies. They shared the proactive things they are doing to control the time they spend online and make digital technology work for their individual growing up journey.

Using app and notification blockers to control their digital technology usage. Practical ways in which participants said they make digital technologies work for them include turning digital notifications off (including social media and newsfeeds) and downloading apps that restrict phone use. For some these approaches work well as they reduce technology-generated distraction and minimise the *"dopamine hits notifications and short reels give you".* Several participants highlighted how useful they found the 'strictness' of certain apps, for example those that make you pay a fee if you try to use social media during a restricted period. Others like that the timings of these blocks can be adjusted to suit personal schedules.

"Lately I have downloaded other apps that restrict my phone usage. This still allows me to use it for a couple of hours every morning just to get my daily routine running, since it helps with my time management." Older participant, Rural workshop

However, other participants shared how they struggle to see how turning off notifications/ blocking certain apps, including social media, could work for them. They say that they need to be connected at all times to function effectively in society.

> *"I think I would turn a blocker on and then immediately feel like I need to turn it on again because I need some information or entertainment of something."* Older participant, Rural workshop

One participant said that whilst the stricter approach of using restrictive software does not appeal to them, they do try to schedule a small amount screen-free time during their week, flexible around life commitments. Another participant spoke about an informal agreement they had with friends to keep phones on silent during time spent catching up together.

> *"We'll switch airplane mode on when we catch up…just so we're not distracted."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

Figure 6: YIG member output created during the YIG 6 meeting – collage highlighting the different tensions that young people have to navigate whilst living digital lives today

Sophisticated algorithms shape digital lives, but young people are determined to make personalisation work for them

Participants are aware that much of today's digital technology, especially social media and the internet, uses complex algorithms to deliver increasingly personalised content to users. Some participants spoke about how they derive agency from learning how to "*manipulate"* these algorithms so that they do only see what they want to online/on social media.

> *"There are definitely tricks to see more of what you like and less of what you don't."* Older participant, Rural workshop

> *"I'll see a video on TikTok that is really oddly specific to something I had looked up…and I think yes, I've made the algorithm work for me there."* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

They emphasised that this learning is complex and ongoing because of the sophistication and fast evolution of algorithms and personalised digital technologies. Because of this, participants understand that not all young people are able to make the algorithm "*work for them*" to the same extent. Participants said this can lead to personalised content being far from aligned with an individual's preferences and interests, sometimes exposing them to distressing and inappropriate content.

> *"To be honest, sometimes I see stuff and think, "Yep that's me", and other times I feel like it has been planted because someone paid the algorithm to put it there. It's just not what I want to see."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

Self-education on the impacts of a digital life is an important way in which young people assert their agency over digital technology

Building on the "*knowledge is power*" theme, participants also discussed how they derive agency from educating themselves about the physical and mental health impacts of extensive technology usage. This includes understanding potential impacts of scrolling on TikTok or Instagram reels first thing in the morning, as well as the mechanisms that make digital technologies addictive.

> *"I did some research into the brain chemistry side of things. Now I know that once your body is addicted to it, your brain constantly craves it. You are literally just fighting against your inner self."* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

As well as understanding more about the cost to health that digital technology can pose, some participants spoke about how they felt more in control after educating themselves about the hidden monetary costs of a digital life. This included understanding how much they were spending because of targeted social media advertisements and cutting back on app subscriptions that would automatically renew. Another participant spoke about feeling more in control after more carefully monitoring how much they were spending using contactless payment and another shared that they had recently turned off 'one click' payments on Amazon.

Messages for decision makers - on financial responsibility

Digital technology is encouraging financial irresponsibility in young people and more support is needed to prevent this leading to lifelong bad habits

Participants are aware of how important it is to learn financial responsibility at this stage of life. They are frustrated that digital technology companies are making this increasingly difficult for young people, especially through "*sneaky*" digital advertising, including using influencers, and the option of digital payment via 'buy now pay later' systems.

Because of the long-term risks of developing unhealthy financial habits at this stage of life, participants call decision makers to action, especially when it comes to digital advertising. They want to see restrictions on younger influencers selling products and normalising overconsumption.

> *"I think a big reason why there are so many younger people online is the fact that there are so many young influencers. Kids look up to them and want what they have, which is often a lot of stuff that's trendy one minute and not the next. TikTok shop is the worst for this."* Younger participant, UK Rural workshop

These workshops reveal that many young people exercise agency over their digital lives. They proactively engage with how these technologies are developed, as well as educating themselves and remaining astute as to how developers use mechanisms to make their technologies appealing to young people. They accept that the nature of society today means that their lives are digital and reflect that it can be frustrating to live in this way so much of the time. They are equally determined to make this reality work for them and their development.

Participants feel that young people are being more proactive than older generations, including their parents, at making digital technology work for them. This includes dealing with the associated harms and navigating complex power dynamics. In the light of this significant responsibility, they call for more support from older generations in navigating the ever-changing digital world.

Messages to decision makers – parental role in digital life support

Learning about digital life could happen in 'real time' alongside parents and teachers

Many participants described the education they received around digital lives either coming too late, after they had figured things out for themselves, or coming from older generations who can't understand the nuances of their experiences. Some suggest a peer-to-peer learning approach would be more beneficial, where teachers facilitate students learning from each-others' "*real time"* experiences.

> *"My mum says that older generations grew up learning how to turn a computer on and off safely. Some of the teachers I have now also taught my mum, they don't understand it the way we young people do. We've grown up with it. It's a custom to us."* Younger participant, Rural workshop

Participants suggested that parents could play a more positive and active role in their digital lives by joining in with gaming or other activities, so they can learn about their children's digital lives "*from the inside"*. They felt this would address, in part, the fact that parents stop engaging with their children's digital technology use during the course of secondary school, with parents only intervening if the school contacts them about a problem.

> *"I think maybe parents should be encouraged to get more involved instead of pushing it away. They should embrace it a bit more. I think that would really go a long way to get an understanding of why their child likes to go online and what they like to do. I think that'd be really important."* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Participants think that by refusing to engage and show an interest parents risk framing digital technology use as a bad thing. In the context of a reality where digital technology use is essential, framing it in this negative light fosters those unpleasant and confusing feelings of guilt and shame (as presented in earlier in this chapter).

Additionally, they feel that because parents and older generations have generally lived in both digital and non-digital worlds, they can often feel less confident navigating digital technology than young people. Participants think that young people have a fundamental role to play in educating and supporting older generations to use their agency and make digital technology work for them.

2.5 Building relationships online

Digital technology helps young people connect with others who share their interests. Importantly, this can help tackle loneliness and build self-esteem in a formative period

Several participants shared their experience of having interests and hobbies that they did not share with their peer group. They recalled feelings of loneliness that extended to

embarrassment and not being able to be their true self. They spoke about how these feelings shifted after finding online communities of people who did share their interests/hobbies. For some participants, finding these communities boosted their confidence in their abilities and skills. They spoke about the importance of having self-confidence during your growing up journey and therefore the pivotal role these communities have played in shaping their journey into adulthood.

> *"I was part of a band and we had a big following…so through social media I was able to meet people up and down the country and arrange shows*." Older participant, UK Rural workshop

Others highlighted how being part of these online communities shaped their education and career choices:

> *"Without social media the car club that I run, it's just no way it would happen. Not on the scale that it's on at the minute. I wouldn't have that platform to be able to arrange these shows. You know, we've been Isle of Wight, we've been there and all over and it wouldn't happen without social media. And this hobby…with cars does tie in with the job I do on the motorways."* Older participant, UK rural workshop

Young people use a variety of digital platforms, including online gaming, to form relationships with others

Participants shared that Snapchat is a significant messaging platform for young people. They think this is due to features that appear to gamify messaging, including snap streaks, and being able to create your own personal avatar. Participants also shared that "*a lot of young people get in relationships through Snapchat*" because of the photographic aspect of its messaging set up. Instagram was also highlighted as a popular means of communicating with peers, specifically through the sharing of reels instead of text messages. Several participants shared that they would not have met significant people in their lives (including romantic partners and close friends) had it not been for social media messaging features.

> *"I have a friend that actually came up initially as a recommended follow on Instagram because we had mutual friends. I think I followed her and then we started messaging randomly".* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

Gaming platforms such as Discord were also highlighted by participants as popular means of communication between young people. During this discussion, several participants highlighted the risks that come with chatting with avatars and made-up usernames (see Chapter 2.3 Wellbeing).

Making connections is an essential part of digital life, but the spaces where this happens do not feel safe - and nobody is in charge

Participants love the ease and fun of keeping in touch with friends, or making new ones online, finding others with the same interests, or connecting with people from all over the world. But across all groups, participants stated their awareness of the risks of connecting with others in an online world where they feel there are few rules or protections.

Online anonymity and the potential for fake profiles can create unsafe or uncomfortable situations which participants say wouldn't happen in person. They explained that creepy behaviour, extreme views or inappropriate mixing of ages would be much more obvious and visible in 'real-world' scenarios.

Figure 7: YIG member output created during the YIG 6 meeting – clay model of 'incognito mode'.

A theme which emerged in all groups was the constant possibility of coming across people or content which is harmful, *simply by chance*, due to the endless breadth of connections and actors on social media or gaming websites, and the weakness of controls, moderation or regulation in the online space.

> *"It's a lottery, it's a gamble. Sometimes you're going to see something that's like, "Oh wow, this new music video is really good." But then sometimes you see someone being like I hate XYZ, something that's horrible. But then you keep scrolling, because, you know, you're sort of locked into it."* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

> *"You can order drugs online, but also you can order your medicine very quickly, which is a positive thing. You can get in a toxic relationship. You can also find people to generally connect with. It is a double-edged sword. And it depends on what you get basically. It's all about luck."* Older participant, Rural workshop

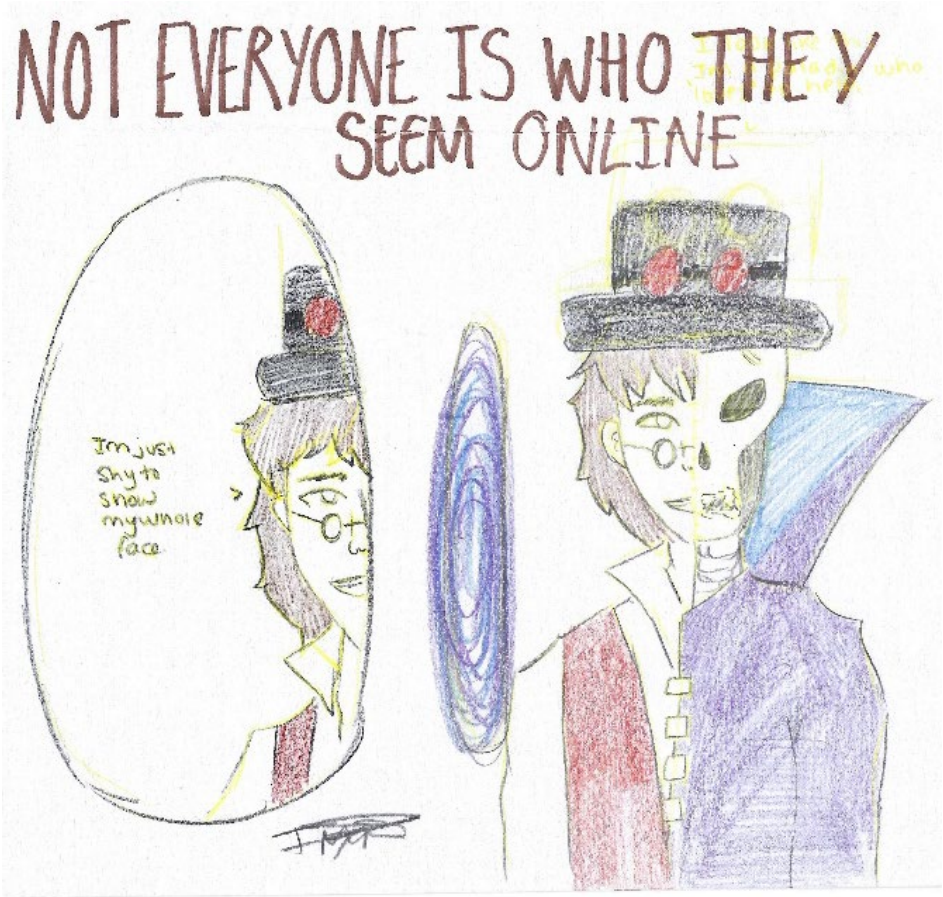

Figure 8: YIG member output created during the YIG 6 meeting – drawing highlighting the risk of people being not who they say they are online.

Messages to decision makers - on dedicated digital spaces

Participants' feelings of unease about being a young person exploring the online world links to their call for more dedicated digital third spaces for young people. This in turn links with a wider call for the creation of more 'third spaces' in society where young people can just be young, separate from school and home. Specifically, participants think that if more of these online spaces existed young people would be less inclined to go to social media for entertainment.

> *"I think there needs to be more dedicated online spaces for kids, because in recent years, when I was a kid, you know there were games websites you could go on. But now a lot of those have gone, so kids are flocking to social media."* Older participant, UK Rural workshop

Crucially, participants feel strongly that access to these spaces must be tightly regulated and dynamically moderated, paying particular attention to the risk of individuals lying about their age. This applies to underage children saying they are older and older people claiming to be a young person in order to access the space.

> *"I think it is really hard to keep restrictions on… because fake IDs do exist and the younger generations are really tech savvy so they can always find ways to bypass restrictions."* Younger participant, West Midlands workshop

The increasingly humanlike nature of chatbots is changing how people engage with them

Most participants shared that they were tuned-in to how AI chatbots are rapidly becoming more human-like. As explored in Chapter 2.2, several participants reflected on how AI is positively supporting their growing up journey, including helping with study skills and finding job opportunities. Participants were generally less comfortable with the potential for an AI chatbot to become something with which they have a close relationship. Some participants appreciate the appeal of being able to chat to 'someone' 24/7, about anything and receive an instant reply, especially those who might struggle with "*real world"* social interactions. However, they were not confident that AI chatbots will ever be able to offer the same level of emotional support and empathy as humans, regardless of significant technological advances. They are concerned that forming relationships with AI chatbots might negatively impact young people who develop an over-reliance on these tools rather than seeking human support and guidance.

> *"I do hear stories of people using AI as a sort of friendship option, talking about their problems, hopes and fears and everything. I'm a bit too scared to do that because a bot hasn't grown up…it can't understand."* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Some participants also shared their concerns that AI chatbots result in young people having unrealistic expectations of their friends. They highlighted the instant nature of a chatbot's reply and the way you can often ask it to answer in a certain way. They think this is giving young people the wrong impression of the amount of control they actually have over interactions and relationships with real people.

Online dating is changing the way young people perceive romantic relationships

Both positive and negative aspects of online dating were discussed amongst older participants. Some wanted to highlight the life-changing role it had played in connecting them with partners who they were unlikely to have met otherwise.

> *"I met my partner through Tinder. Without Tinder I would never have known who he was!"* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Others highlighted some disconcerting realities of online dating, including ghosting and catfishing. Feeling like you have to "*sell'"* yourself on your online dating profile was also shared as something that puts additional pressure on young people. Having to profile your "*best bits*" at a time in life when you are still forming an individual identity can be problematic and, participants believe, potentially lead to life-long issues with self-esteem. It is in this context that several participants expressed enthusiasm for more in-person dating events for young people. They think that these would be popular with those who have digital fatigue and struggle to make meaningful connections digitally.

Beyond dating apps, participants highlighted that social media is changing the dating landscape by making personal information more readily available. As well as the role of Instagram feeds in offering a window into your life, they also noted that LinkedIn can reveal details of your education and interests that you might not otherwise share until later on in a relationship.

> *“My friend, she always looks on Instagram but also LinkedIn before a date to get an idea of what their life is like. I think that’s quite random because how far is that from the original purpose of LinkedIn? But it works for her.”* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Participants are perceptive to how digital technology is changing the way young people communicate with each other offline

Participants spoke about how digital technology is changing what we say to people and how we say it. They pointed out that it leads to the emergence of new words and phrases that people in other age groups would not necessarily know the meaning of. They also reflected on the prevalence amongst young people of communicating via memes, with cultural references that might exclude other generations. One participant reflected specifically that digital communication is accelerating the evolution of language, as it has to keep up with fleeting social media trends and the pace of technology development.

> *“I can be around my little cousins, and they start saying random stuff based on what they’ve seen online. I don’t understand what they are talking about.”* Older participant, West Midlands workshop

Some participants wanted to share their concerns around how mobile phone use is a barrier to what would in most situations be seen as respectful communication, including eye contact and listening skills. They said that it was unpleasant to be talking to someone who was evidently distracted by their phone.

> *“I’ll be out with my friend, and she’ll be glued to her phone. And the only time we ever really have a good conversation is when her phone dies.”* Younger participant, UK Rural workshop

3. Conclusion

This report presents the findings from two DDWs with young people aged 14-24, which explored Gen Z's experiences of digital life today. The workshops were co-designed and interpreted alongside a Youth Insight Group, and form part of The Nuffield Foundation's *Grown Up? Journeys to adulthood* engagement programme.

The workshops show that digital tools are a constant presence in young peoples' lives, from the moment their alarm goes off on their smartphones in the morning. The evolution of their digital lives takes place alongside milestones in their education; moving from family-centred entertainment during primary school years, to an intense, peer-driven acceleration of smartphone and social media use at secondary school, to more discerning and work-oriented activities at college, university and work.

Although participants appreciate and enjoy the ease, convenience and constant entertainment provided by digital life, they are aware that their health and happiness is being affected by overuse, the amplification of social pressures, and regular exposure to manipulative, inappropriate and inaccurate content. They feel they are having to learn how to navigate a lawless digital world on their own as they grow up and have developed a range of strategies to mitigate unwanted effects on their lives, albeit with mixed results.

Building relationships and connections through social media or gaming is an essential part of their growing up journey, whether this means making or keeping in touch with friends, looking for partners, finding like-minded communities, or connecting with people from diverse backgrounds and cultures. But participants are aware that building connections in the vast, poorly regulated digital space, means that coming across problematic actors or content can happen by chance at any moment. Participants also find that living in a world of digital interactions, can make in-person interactions feel less natural and more challenging.

The young people we spoke with are clear sighted about the vulnerabilities they experience at different stages of their digital lives. They would like to be able to enjoy and benefit from everything digital life has to offer, without being part of a constant battle against temptation, manipulation and pressure. The current situation they describe pits their individual willpower and digital nous against the might of technology companies, without a great deal of effective support and regulation from anywhere else. Many are very protective of their younger selves, knowing they were exposed to online risks at an early age. They call for safer spaces for children and teenagers to spend time online, with robust ID checks, more active human moderation, paywalls for adult content, and consequences for companies that put children at risk. Older participants call for stricter rules around misleading or inappropriate online advertising, and platforms that encourage overspending.

Some participants would like the adults in their lives to play a more active role in their digital lives. At school they would like to learn more about making the best of their digital lives but would prefer teachers to facilitate peer-to-peer learning, rather than teaching them about online safety in ways which can quickly seem out of date. Some would like parents to join in with activities like gaming, to understand and share their

digital lives, rather than reprimanding or scaremongering from a distance, which can add to feelings of guilt and unease.

Solutions around poor mental and physical health and shortened attention spans caused by digital overuse, are not necessarily found within the digital realm. Above all, participants call for more opportunity to balance digital life with 'real' life, to experience the best of both worlds. They call for the provision of non-digital spaces and opportunities; social 'third' spaces to meet other young people; access to nature; both girls and boys being enabled to play sports, and more tangible, hands-on, real-world experiences.

This is particularly important at secondary school age, where digital life is at its most intense. Many participants described ineffective and inconsistent rules around smartphones in schools, with some saying they would feel uncomfortable without access to their phones all day, and others saying schools expect them to use phones for learning. Some suggest an outright ban is the only effective course of action to provide the non-digital spaces they need. This is a key area for future research.

The young people in this study have provided a fresh and up-to-the minute snapshot of the current generation's experience of digital life. They shared the highs and lows of their digital lives, and their efforts to make them healthier, safer and more enjoyable. Participants also shared their hope and expectation that decision makers would proactively assume more responsibility both within and outside of the digital space, to enable young people to make the most of their digital lives as just one part of a varied and fulfilling journey to adulthood.

This programme of DDWs has shown the HVM team that there is room for more research in this space. Our work with young people has highlighted some significant experiences of growing up digitally. Ongoing research could be focused on what young people think should be the next steps to enable young people to grasp the "*double-edged sword*" - to benefit from the opportunities of living digitally offers whilst minimising and managing the risks.

This could include research which delves more deeply into the different experiences of young people in a variety of contexts, for example:

- Genders
- Locations and geographies
- Ethnicities
- Parental and care experiences.

Whilst these workshops, and the YIG, explored these topics in detail, there is room for a greater exploration of some of the specific issues that have emerged on digital lives. This could be conducted in a deliberative dialogue, or national conversation, with young people across the country. Extending both the scope and the scale of the topics raised.

Participants in the DDWs and YIG members are calling for decision makers to take what is contained in this report seriously. We repeat their calls to action on the final page.

Summary - messages for decision makers

- Rules around phone use in schools are new, variable and often not strictly enforced. Participants want decision makers to appreciate how phone bans are realistically operating in schools and reflect carefully on future related legislation.
- Social media is often used as a scapegoat for causing societal issues that have existed since long before the digital age.
- Digital technology-induced loneliness is isolating the younger generation and mental health services need to be aware of and prepared for this.
- Digital technology is encouraging financial irresponsibility in young people and more support is needed to prevent this leading to lifelong bad habits.
- Learning about digital life should happen in ‘real time’ alongside parents and teachers.
- Participants’ feelings of unease around being a young person exploring the online world links to their call for more dedicated digital third spaces for young people.

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