
Gen Z digital life is life – but not by choice

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As part of the Nuffield Foundation's [Grown Up? journeys to adulthood programme](#), we have explored the role digital technologies play in young people's lives in [Growing Up Online](#) – which distils the latest quantitative research on this theme. But to get a sense of what young people's digital lives really look like requires us to go beyond numbers, ask probing questions and explore the day-to-day lived experience.

This report, *Born connected: How Gen Z navigate their digital lives*, does precisely that through the Youth Insight Group and deep dive workshops, expertly facilitated by the social research agency Hopkins Van Mil. The workshops gave us a brilliant opportunity to hear participants speak eloquently about how they are navigating growing up online.

The conversations reveal that these young people want to live in a world that is kind, caring, strong on community, not commercialisation, and that isn't digital first. They want decision-makers to be clear and consistent when tackling the harms that technology and artificial intelligence (AI) can bring.

The recommendations proposed by the participants are worthy of serious consideration by policymakers, innovators and social media and technology platforms. From my perspective, there are four key takeaways from this project that I hope will resonate with readers.

Phones are a problem, but not the problem

Participants called for clarity on whether phone use is to be regulated or banned in school, they also clear that preventing access to mobile devices runs the risk of cutting young people off from access to education and work, research, information, and healthcare, travel, and financial services. The societal conversation around the banning of phones is complex. The proposed solutions are far from straightforward.

If it's not the phone, then what is it?

From what we heard, phones may not be the root cause of the problem. Rather, harms were seen to be generated by social media platforms, the never-ending scroll, and algorithmically determined feeds that can involuntarily expose young people to harmful content. Not to mention the predominance of online advertising and the saturated over-commercialisation of youth. Exposure to one or more of these elements of digital life was identified as the greater and more insidious problem for young people, affecting their development, friendships, mental health, attention and overall well-being.

The failure of tech companies and social media platforms to design products and online environments not built on a foundation of addiction or distraction remains deeply troubling. It is unsurprising that participants wanted more online spaces that are appropriate for young people. And yet, as research has shown, when platforms claim to offer these age-appropriate environments, the reality is far from what people expect or want¹.

Whether the UK's Age Appropriate Design Code² and Online Safety Act³, or other international attempts to reduce harm and improve digital spaces for young people – such as Australia's ban of social media use under the age of 16⁴ – will succeed remains a critical question for society and legislators worldwide.

Young people are doing the best they can with what they have to take control of their digital lives and minimise harms

While it was impressive to hear participants speak of the ways they and their peers are seeking to take control of their time, energy and availability, it was frankly disheartening to hear that the emphasis from the platforms, regulation and policymakers remains focused on young people being expected to manage their digital lives – and now their engagement with AI – on top of everything else they have to contend with. It should not be their responsibility to navigate a safe path; the protection measures should be baked in as standard, not as a choice.

Digital by default may not be the preference of Gen Z

Policymakers must not assume that just because young people are growing up at a time when digital, technology, and now AI, are prevalent, it is the world they want or a world they ought to be happy to accept. If anything, what we heard is human relationships, physical experiences, bricks and mortar and real money, not tap and go, are the experiences Generation Z find most engaging and most beneficial.

Finally, the aim of the Grown Up? programme is to generate evidence and insights that can inspire researchers, practitioners and policymakers to pick up the baton and develop proposals that look even more closely at issues affecting young people and the journey to adulthood. This report provides a wealth of opportunities, which I hope will be a source of inspiration. I want to thank everyone who participated in this research.

Endnotes

- 1 [Teen-Accounts-Broken-Promises-How-Instagram-is-failing-to-protect-minors.pdf](#)
- 2 [Age appropriate design: a code of practice for online services | ICO](#)
- 3 [Online safety - Ofcom](#)
- 4 [Social media age restrictions | eSafety Commissioner](#)