Family
Online Safety
Institute

2021 Research Report

Managing the Narrative

Young People's Use of Online Safety Tools

Introduction

Gen Z is having a moment.

Every day comes new stories about the impacts and potential harms of technology on teens and young people. There are legitimate concerns and calls for action by parents, educators, psychologists and lawmakers. Building effective solutions will be complex and challenging, and will require the tech industry to continue refining the tools that young people are asking for to be safe, private and secure online.

We wanted to hear from Generation Z directly in this discussion. As the findings of this report go on to show, they have an interest in safety and citizenship online, and teens in particular hold a sense of optimism for where the digital world can go. Learning from them is a critical part of informing the policies, education efforts, and platform tools that govern whether their experiences online are positive or negative.

It is these online safety tools, not parental controls, that this report explores. While a great deal of attention has been given (rightly so) to empowering parents to monitor and control what their children see and experience online, it is equally important to focus on ways in which teens and young people are curating and experiencing their own digital lives.

We believe that when a child reaches a level of maturity where they can make responsible decisions online, parents should move from monitoring to mentoring and from blocking to talking. A parent's role changes to being more of a co-pilot – often learning from their teen about the safety features they are already using to block, report, hide or mute. This strategy is about giving teens agency and empowering them to take control of their online lives and digital reputation, while still providing them with the guidance and support they need.

Not only do online safety tools need to be continuously updated and improved, but the message needs to be spread to users about how and when to use them. In our findings, young people expressed a clear ask for clarity, consistency, and ease when locating and learning about safety features. We need educational programs to support awareness, further research to evaluate the efficacy of safety tools, and to encourage a culture of action and personal responsibility to ensure a safer online world.

We hope that the findings in this report will inspire the tech industry to continue innovating safety tools for teens and young people to use. If you are a parent, talk with your teen about what they already do to stay safe and private online. If our results are anything to go by, you'll probably learn a thing or two!

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About this study

This study was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of FOSI using three approaches:

24

A qualitative study conducted from June 22-24, 2021, among 24 teenagers and young adults aged 13 to 24 who engage in online activities and spend at least 5 hours/week online.

1,000

A quantitative Gen Z study conducted from August 11-23, 2021, among 1,000 teenagers and young adults aged 13 to 24.

2,076

A quantitative Parents study conducted from August 31 – September 2, 2021, among 2,076 adults aged 18 and over from which the focus was 548 parents of children under 18 who spend time online.

For complete survey methodology, please view the Full Methodology at the end of this report.

Overview

In 2021, there isn't a simple answer about how Generation Z relates to the digital world. They are simultaneously enthusiastic yet trepidatious, seeing both value and risk in spending time online. They understand that this technology plays a crucial role in their lives, and therefore they may need to live with some risk to their online safety to reap the rewards. Growing up with technology (and its role as a necessity) makes them willing (or maybe just resigned) to accept the good with the bad. Gen Z'ers admit to being almost too hooked on technology, and yet their usage still seems to be trending upward.

For Gen Z as a whole, the key purposes of technology and social media center on entertainment, connection, and communication.

Within that, there is a lot of variation in behavior and attitudes, which differs dramatically by age, between what teens (ages 13-17) and young adults (ages 18-24) are feeling and doing. Both age groups find social media informative and influential, but teens seem to enjoy it far more, and report feeling happier and more confident while using it. Young adults lean more toward cynicism and criticism, expressing greater social and emotional reservations or negative feelings.

Some of these differentiations may be explained by lifestyle factors. Teenagers spend most of their time on activities related to their immediate sphere such as school, work, and gaming. Young adults rely on the Internet more broadly to interact with the outside world by shopping, banking, dating, and searching for information.

While online, most Gen Z'ers express an overall sense of safety and baseline confidence in knowing how to protect themselves, but young adults again express more resistance and greater security concerns. Both age groups recognize their usage may come at a cost and see their personal safety as "at risk" on the Internet.

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There is pervasive concern about companies' willingness and ability to do the right thing. In general, Gen Z'ers express uncertainty that companies are responsible with the use of their personal data. As it relates to social media, nearly eight in ten Gen Z'ers don't believe that platforms do enough to punish users when there are instances of bad behavior. Currently, awareness of (and satisfaction with) the safety tools available directly through social media platforms is moderate. Only one-fifth of teens and young adults report being very satisfied with in-platform tools.

With all that in mind, it's not surprising that Gen Z recognizes the importance of digital citizenship and striving to use technology in a kind and responsible way. However, while their interest in digital citizenship is high, there are clear gaps on execution. Half of all Gen Z'ers – especially young adults – say they are overwhelmed by the process. There are also teenage social dynamics at play that complicate how Gen Z'ers use safety tools and whether they feel comfortable taking action when they see bad behavior online.

There is widespread agreement within Gen Z, especially among teens, that the burden lies with parents to educate their children about the potential risks of being online.

Parents recognize their role, but this essential collaboration between parents and Gen Z is fraught with many challenges. The most common is that parents feel overwhelmed by the task of keeping their kids safe online, but are also uninformed and ill-prepared. Over half don't feel like they can keep pace with the changes happening online and suggest that their children likely know more than they do. They remain somewhat confident that they are up to the task and are trying different strategies like setting aside time to unplug. However, like their kids, they too need support on how to go forward.

What does Gen Z's use of technology and social media look like?

The relationship that Gen Z has with technology is positive yet complicated, marked by widespread enthusiasm and hints of dependence and discomfort.

As a cohort, Gen Z spends a considerable amount of time online and doesn't appear interested in changing their habits. They are almost universally eager for the launch of new technology and the impact it will have on the future. Teens, in particular, seem most enthusiastic about technology.

- The majority of Gen Z'ers have a significant social media presence, with nearly all (87%) having accessed at least one platform in the past three months. On average, teens spend approximately four hours each day on social media; among young adults, this increases to five hours each day.

    o   Overwhelmingly, Gen Z'ers (89%) say they like using social media.
    o   Nearly three-quarters of social media users (73%) describe themselves as engaged (i.e., engaging with content and either occasionally or frequently posting themselves).

At the same time, Gen Z'ers characterize their generation as being too hooked on technology and agree that social media consumes much of their time. They have an awareness of the need to "unplug" from the digital world every now and then.

- Over half admit they spend too much time on social media (56%, with young adults far more than teens; 66% vs. 44%). Gen Z'ers report trying to unplug for at least a few hours every week (61%). A little over one-third (35%) are spending less time online now than they did one year ago. Of this year over year decline, it is slightly more common among young adults (39%) compared to teens (31%).

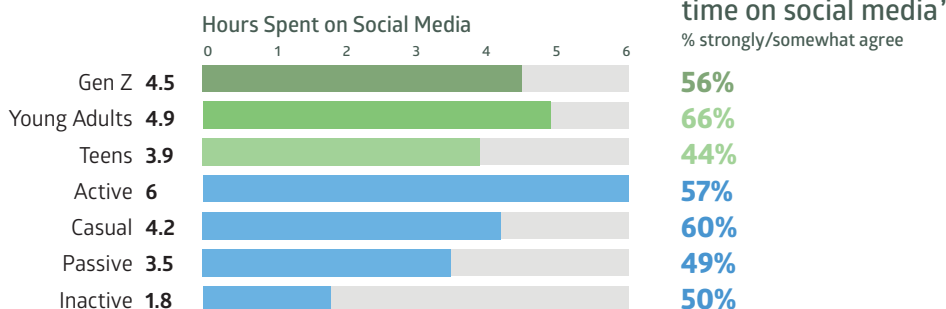## Greater online use leads to greater consternation

Hours Spent on Social Media

	Hours	"I spend too much time on social media" % strongly/somewhat agree
Gen Z	4.5	56%
Young Adults	4.9	66%
Teens	3.9	44%
Active	6	57%
Casual	4.2	60%
Passive	3.5	49%
Inactive	1.8	50%

(Figure 1)

56%

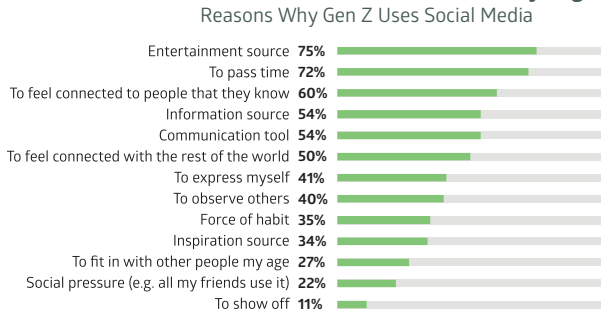Over half admit they spend too much time on social media

(Figure 1)

Fun is more common than function when it comes to Internet use among Gen Z.

For Gen Z, the Internet is more a source of entertainment than information, although this differs by age and life phase. Social media, video games, and content streaming top the list over school or work, banking, or reading the news. Entertainment is also the #1 stated reason why Gen Z'ers access social media specifically. Outside of entertainment, one of the key purposes of social media is staying connected to people they know.

Entertainment and passing the time are main reason for Gen Z accessing social media; differences exist between teens and young adults
Reasons Why Gen Z Uses Social Media

Entertainment source	**75%**
To pass time	**72%**
To feel connected to people that they know	**60%**
Information source	**54%**
Communication tool	**54%**
To feel connected with the rest of the world	**50%**
To express myself	**41%**
To observe others	**40%**
Force of habit	**35%**
Inspiration source	**34%**
To fit in with other people my age	**27%**
Social pressure (e.g. all my friends use it)	**22%**
To show off	**11%**

(Figure 2)

There are some stark usage differences between the teen and young adult age groups of 13-17 and 18-24 that may also drive certain attitudes about technology. Teens rely on the Internet for activities that most often center on their immediate sphere – playing games or performing required tasks for school/work. By contrast, young adults are more inclined to explore other areas such as searching for information, dating, shopping, and banking online. They are much more likely to take advantage of social media to make connections to the outside world, and this expanded scope of reference and function may help to explain why the older Gen Z'ers have greater security concerns and more pessimism about things that take place online.

Accessing social media (87%), streaming content (82%), and playing video games (80%) are the most common reasons that Gen Z'ers have gone online in the past 90 days. Only about half perform work/school tasks (55%), read content (54%) or bank (46%).

That said, usage varies by life stage:

o   Older Gen Z'ers are much more likely to: search for information (82% of young adults vs. 76% of teens); shop (77% of young adults vs. 59% of teens); and read content (58% of young adults vs. 48% of teens).
o   Not surprisingly, activities that are more age restricted such as banking and using online dating apps/websites, are used far more by older Gen Z ages 18-24 (87% banking, 79% dating).
o   By contrast, teens are more likely to play video games (86% of teens vs. 75% of young adults) and perform school/work tasks, e.g. homework or other projects (61% of teens vs. 51% of young adults).

Young adults are more inclined to explore areas of the Internet outside of their immediate world.

Most Gen Z'ers use social media primarily as a source of entertainment (75%), passing time (72%), and connecting to people they know (60%).

Seeing social media as a tool for communication and connection, only a little more than one-quarter of Gen Z'ers report they use social media only to fit in with other people their age (27%) or because they feel pressured to do so (22%).

Gen Z'ers agree the digital world isn't always what it seems.

Peer pressure and conformity isn't a driving force behind Gen Z's decision to use social media, but still, their presence online is not always as it seems. Two-thirds admit that they are sometimes "fake" on social media and only present their best selves. Young adults (ages 18-24) are even more inclined than teens (ages 13-17) to struggle with some social-emotional experiences when using social media, from frustration and discomfort to jealousy, depression, or feeling isolated.

70% of Gen Z'ers say the world or content they see on social media doesn't reflect how things really are. About two-thirds admit they only show their best selves on social media (68%) and feel "fake" at least some of the time that they spend on social media (64%).
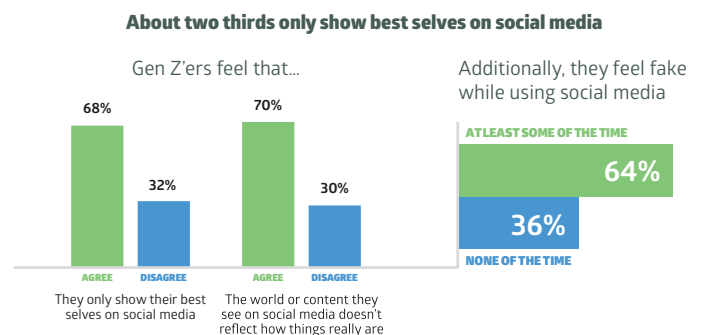
About two thirds only show best selves on social media

Gen Z'ers feel that...

	AGREE	DISAGREE
They only show their best selves on social media	68%	32%
The world or content they see on social media doesn't reflect how things really are	70%	30%

Additionally, they feel fake while using social media

AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME **64%**
NONE OF THE TIME **36%**

Figure 3

Optimism, cynicism & trust

Some disconnect appears between what Gen Z'ers feel is happening in the "bigger picture" of the digital world versus what's happening in their own experience.

For the most part, Gen Z does not see social media as having a positive impact on society in general, or on young people specifically. However, they are far more likely to say their peers are impacted negatively than they are themselves. In their personal experience, Gen Z describes online interactions and the content they view as mostly positive – a clear disconnect with the impact they feel it has on other people their age and the outside world.

It seems most Gen Z'ers are willing to take the good with the bad and are able to classify their own experiences online differently than what they see taking place in the online world as a whole. Participants in the qualitative study tended to view the scale of bad behavior and harms online as a problem bigger than themselves, with a much more manageable focus on simply curating and keeping their own immediate online space safe.

"*My first gut reaction is to think about what I can do to prevent it*, and if I can't help it, *I'll just leave whatever it is that's making me anxious*. That's what's great about being online, you can (in most cases) just leave." – Graham, 15

"*It makes me very mad.* I really hate when people are mean and especially online when they are hidden behind a screen. Unless it is someone I know that is being offended or someone I know that is being the offender, I don't normally say anything besides to other friends where I might complain about the issue." – Juliana, 19

"I feel sad that the world has come to this. *I wish that people wouldn't use social media to argue with other people they may have never even met.* I usually try to ignore and avoid it at all costs. My reputation online is much too important to risk getting in an argument and having it be public for people to see." – Grayson, 23

Few (less than one in five) Gen Z'ers reported feeling "*very* safe" online, and yet they appear to welcome social media as an intrinsic, necessary part of their lives – particularly teens.

At this age, it may be that many feel a sense of invincibility. While they may be aware of certain risks that they see others experience or hear about on the news, they don't believe they will be directly impacted by them. Additionally, not being online or participating on popular platforms could create social obstacles and result in less access to friends. It is also possible that younger teenagers' more narrow scope of activities online may mean that they have simply not yet been exposed to anything truly negative yet. That said, the qualitative research suggests that when teens do see something negative, even if infrequently, there is a significant emotional impact.

"It affected me that people were saying I was bad at a game, and that really got into my head." – Liam, 13

"I started to become more worried about my body and my face. I would get really anxious during the class when thinking about if people were watching me over Zoom." – Ava, 14

"My mental and emotional health were taxed a little bit in those situations. It would make me feel kind of on edge when I was online and when I got off." – Eve, 18

It is important to note that the perceived tone of social media also presents clear and dramatic differences between teens and young adults. While both age cohorts enjoy social media and most commonly describe it as "useful," teens are far more likely to depict it in a positive instead of negative light.

Teens lean much more heavily toward feeling happy (55%), confident (44%), unique (35%), and empowered (28%) all or most of the time when using social media. More young adults say social media makes them feel jealous (72%), isolated (69%), and depressed (66%).

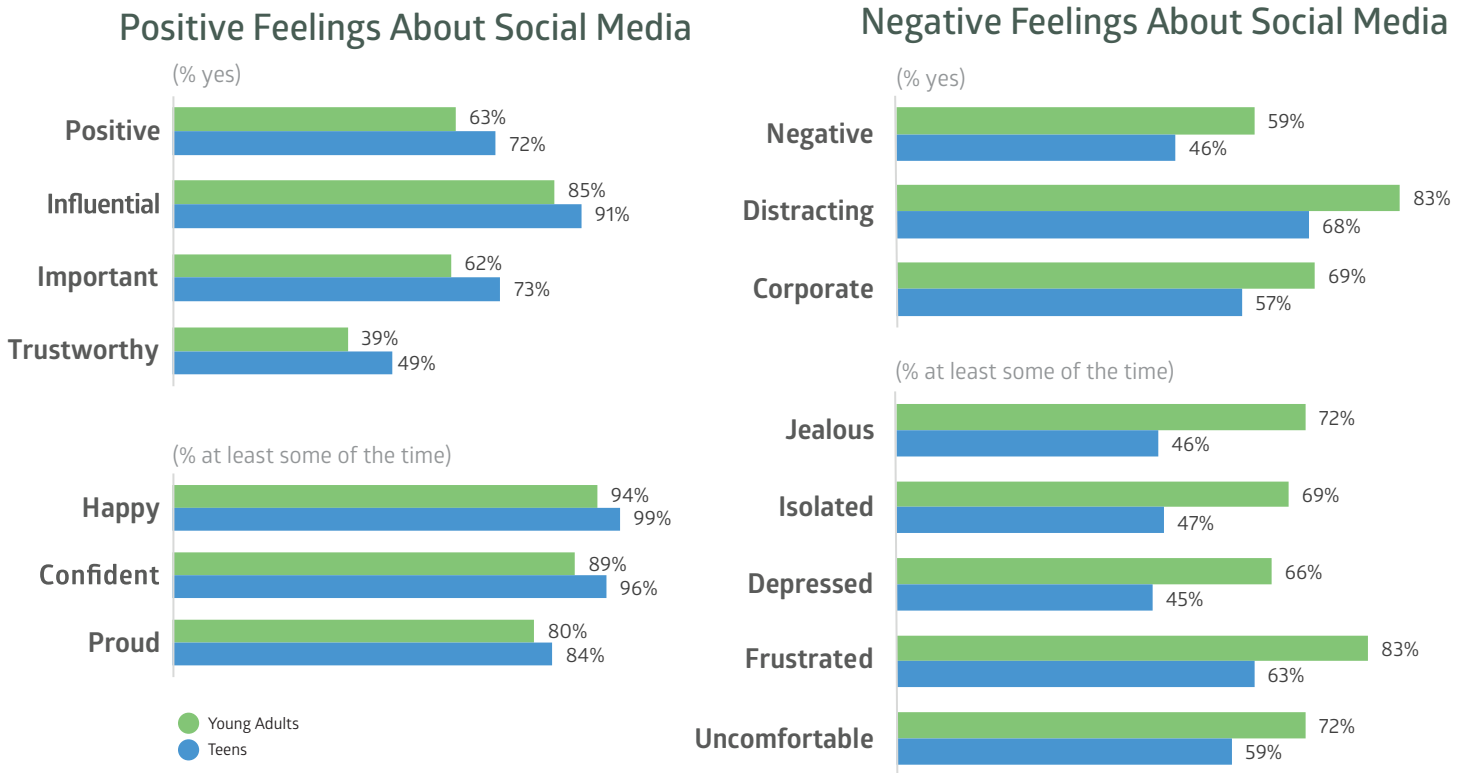# Teens cast much more positive light on social media than young adults

Positive Feelings About Social Media

(% yes)

Feeling	Young Adults	Teens
Positive	63%	72%
Influential	85%	91%
Important	62%	73%
Trustworthy	39%	49%

(% at least some of the time)

Feeling	Young Adults	Teens
Happy	94%	99%
Confident	89%	96%
Proud	80%	84%

● Young Adults
● Teens

Negative Feelings About Social Media

(% yes)

Feeling	Young Adults	Teens
Negative	59%	46%
Distracting	83%	68%
Corporate	69%	57%

(% at least some of the time)

Feeling	Young Adults	Teens
Jealous	72%	46%
Isolated	69%	47%
Depressed	66%	45%
Frustrated	83%	63%
Uncomfortable	72%	59%

Figure 4

Teens also frame social media as a key tool that is informative (91%), important (73%), and trustworthy (49%). Young adults are more critical, with a much larger majority depicting it as a distraction (83%) or corporate (69%).

Nearly all Gen Z'ers (87%) are excited about the impact that new technology will have on the future, teens (92%) more than young adults (83%).

Despite this excitement, a large majority of Gen Z'ers (80%) also believe that their generation is too dependent on technology.

Gen Z'ers feel that social media in particular has not generally had a positive impact on the world; this is especially the case with young adults (70% of young adults vs. 59% of teens regarding people their age; and 75% of young adults vs. 65% of teens regarding society overall).
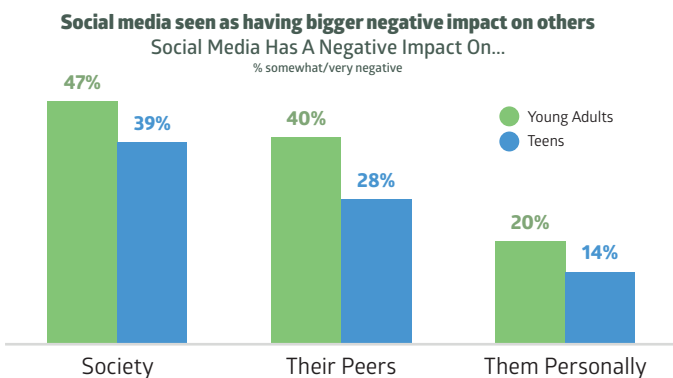
Notably, Gen Z'ers, especially teens, are also almost twice as likely to say that social media has had a negative impact on people their age rather than on them personally (35% vs. 18%). In further contrast, they report a more positive impact on themselves personally compared to people their age (43% vs. 35%).

Young adults and teens feel quite differently about social media, with teens more often associating positivity with social media use (72% vs. 63%) and young adults finding it more negative (59% vs. 46%):

Teens are more likely to characterize social media as influential (91% of teens vs. 85% of young adults), informative (91% vs. 84%), important (73% vs. 62%), and trustworthy (49% vs. 39%).

When they use social media, young adults are more likely than teens to feel frustrated (83% of young adults at least sometimes vs. 63% of teens, respectively), overwhelmed (73% vs. 59%), uncomfortable (72% vs. 59%), angry (72% vs. 58%), jealous (72% vs. 46%), isolated (69% vs. 47%), fake (67% vs. 59%), or depressed (66% vs. 45%).

When teens use social media, they are more likely than young adults to feel happy (55% all or most of the time vs. 43%, respectively), confident (44% vs. 29%), or unique (35% vs. 27%).

Social media seen as having bigger negative impact on others
Social Media Has A Negative Impact On...
% somewhat/very negative

Impact	Young Adults	Teens
Society	47%	39%
Their Peers	40%	28%
Them Personally	20%	14%

● Young Adults
● Teens

Figure 5

Online safety and individual action

Encouraging Gen Z'ers to protect themselves online presents some unique challenges, but there is interest and aptitude.

There is a strong consensus among Gen Z that it is important to take action to ensure personal safety online. However, despite this pervasive interest, approximately half find the process of managing their personal online safety to be overwhelming (52%) and a significant number – over four in ten – don't feel they have access to the needed resources to manage it properly (42%). Only one-quarter feel very confident in knowing what steps to take to stay protected. Young adults - perhaps due to their greater experience online or engagement with higher-risk activities like banking and dating - seem even more anxious and unprepared than teens.

The overall confidence level when it comes to safety is middling. While most feel somewhat safe spending time online and somewhat confident in knowing how to protect themselves, they feel neither very safe nor very confident. Half of teens and young adults see their personal safety as at risk when they are on the Internet and both age groups are equally concerned about their data security as their personal safety.

When they are online, half of Gen Z (49% teens, 51% young adults) are similarly concerned, if not more so, about their own personal safety as they are about the safety of their data.

Strong enjoyment while using social media, yet half still fear for personal safety online

I like using
social media.

I fear my personal
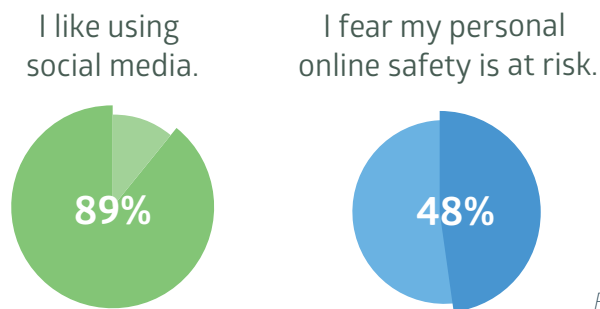online safety is at risk.

89%

48%

Figure 6

83% of Gen Z'ers feel at least somewhat safe when they spend time online, but only 18% feel very safe. Around half of both age groups (48%) believe their online safety is at risk (46% of teens vs 49% of young adults).

Nearly all of Gen Z'ers (95%) agree that it's at least somewhat important to manage personal online safety; 53% say very important. The vast majority (86%) are at least somewhat confident they can keep themselves safe when they spend time online, though only 26% are very confident.

52% find the process of managing their personal online safety to be overwhelming, and 42% say they don't have access to the resources needed to do so.

There is strong support for digital citizenship among Gen Z.

Given all of this, it is not surprising that when presented with a definition of digital citizenship, Gen Z'ers, especially teens, recognize its importance. They acknowledge some of the risks of interacting online and the value of responsible and kind use of technology, but it also seems that they may need more support or "proof points" to take action on their own. There is a feeling that the negativity and unkind behavior that they see online is "bigger than them" and there is a feeling of being powerless to affect change unless they are directly or personally impacted by an issue.

Currently, 82% of Gen Z'ers consider the concept of digital citizenship to be at least somewhat important.[1]

Gen Z overwhelmingly supports the concept of digital citizenship
82% of Gen Z'ers agree digital citizenship is important to them
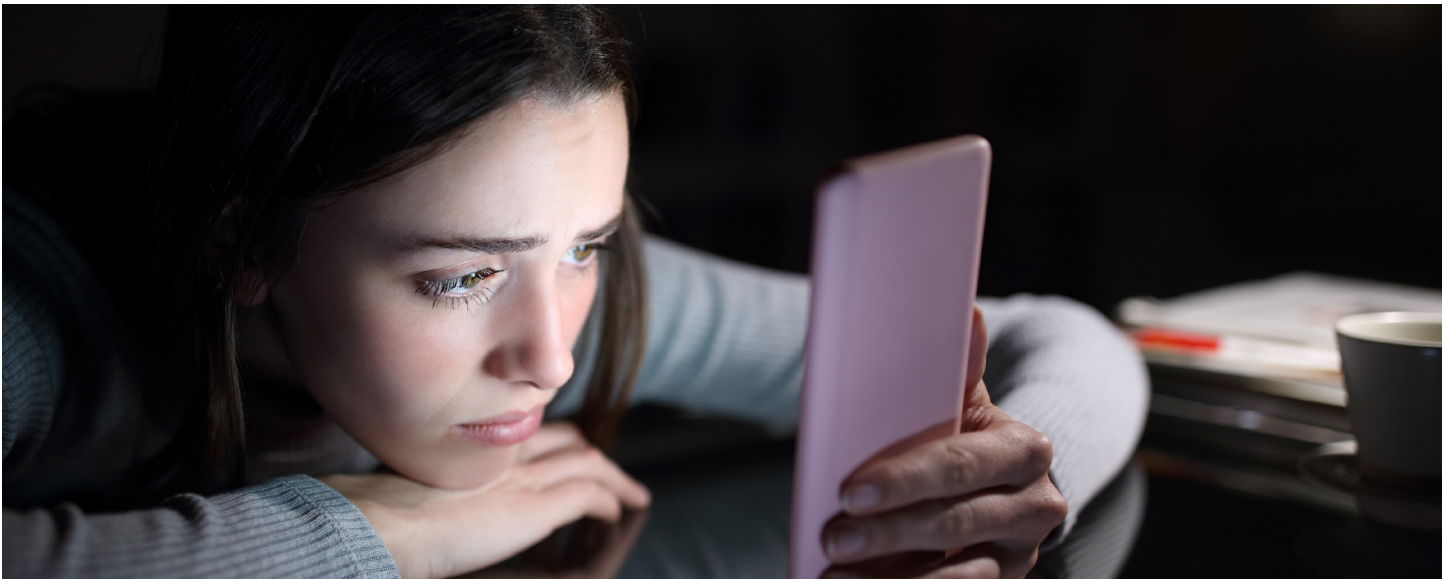
Figure 7

"I think all social platforms should encourage people to be good digital citizens and they have a responsibility to their users to have community guidelines and ensure that they are followed." – Bea, 24

"I think they should provide resources for people to be good digital citizens. Providing information about what this term means and ways that you can be a good digital citizen when you sign up for their app would be one way. I think also having specific consequences laid out if you are not being a good digital citizen on their app would be a good idea." – Elizabeth, 22

"They are providing these privileges but along with this privileges they have to give us a way to be safe and promote people to not take advantage of these platforms. after that then it is up to us to use these." – Isabella, 15

Social dynamics play a key role in the use of online safety tools.

There is a sense among respondents that reporting or taking action against negative behavior can be intimidating and may not result in change or resolution. There are also some social dynamics to be addressed when it comes to how standing up to bad behavior is perceived. Most Gen Z'ers express greater willingness to confront bad behavior when it is happening to someone they know.

"I often only take action on unkind online behavior when it relates to a close friend or family member because that means it is directly impacting someone I know/care about. If it is anyone that I don't really know, I feel out of place to jump in. Being someone I don't know, means I don't know the full story or situation that is going on." – Brendan, 22

"If it gets really bad and it is also affecting multiple people, then yes. But when it comes to reporting I feel as though it doesn't get handled unless it is a big problem." – Ava, 15

Management of their "micro" or personal social media world is much more sensitive. Taking action within immediate social groups is tempered by fears of hurting feelings, harming relationships or calling attention to themselves if they use some of the safety tools available to them. According to the qualitative research, teens and young adults are often more hesitant to block, mute or report someone they know and are more open to using these tactics for strangers, hackers, and scammers.

"I might not leave a group chat if it's a small group and people will notice I left." – Bea, 24

"I just know if I leave a conversation I will not be able to join back unless someone adds me and I would just like to still be in the chat rather than having the risk of never getting back in. This has happened to one of my friends." – Nolan, 13

Gen Z'ers are more likely to take action against inappropriate content or bad actors and use online safety tools as part of their "macro" or larger social media world, where personal relationships would not be directly impacted.

Over one-third admit they feel uncomfortable taking steps against someone they know personally and worry what their friends will think if they do something. However, blocking someone that they don't know in order to stop seeing offensive content, is considered an "easy fix."

For many, the biggest barrier to using online safety tools is a lack of confidence that their actions will generate a reaction or result on the part of the various platforms.

As it relates to their experience of social media, the majority (68%) are more comfortable taking action against bad behavior (i.e., inappropriate or hateful posts/messaging) that they see happening to others, compared to bad behavior that they personally experience.

Over one in three worry about what their friends will think if they take action against bad behavior on social media (34%) and feel pressure not to act when someone they know personally behaves badly (39%).

Qualitatively, the Gen Z'ers indicated that blocking a person is the "easiest" and least offensive way to ensure that one does not have to interact with them, without facing repercussions. Importantly, they also know that blocking is a "short-term" fix and really doesn't solve larger online safety issues, it is simply often the fastest and simplest way to avoid interaction.

"I guess I didn't think the offense was extreme enough to report. And the thought of writing up a statement against the person to put in the report was intimidating. I would just want to block the person and be done with it." – Eve, 18

Actions taken by social media companies

When it comes to making users feel safe, social media platforms still have some ground to cover.

Nearly eight in ten don't believe social media companies do enough to punish bad behavior, and over four in ten rate these companies poorly for protecting users' personal information. Concerning satisfaction with online safety tools available on social media sites, only one-fifth of Gen Z is very satisfied and half are somewhat satisfied. This lukewarm reaction may be a result of many factors such as a lack of awareness or understanding of the tools being offered, perceived ineffectiveness, or poor experiences with follow-through from the platforms when tools are used.

Given their interest in digital citizenship, Gen Z'ers may be motivated in knowing that the platforms they are using take action and provide tools that ensure a positive and safe environment.

In the qualitative discussion group, many Gen Z'ers had ideas for online safety tools including stricter and more personalized privacy settings, cybersecurity training, increased data usage transparency and even age limits on certain sites.

In some instances these tools already exist, which tells us that respondents are either unaware or unable to find them within a given platform. This highlights a common challenge for all social media platforms – once the tools are built, what is the best way of educating users that they're there? Gen Z'ers report that these tools are sometimes "buried" within websites or apps, often need updating or are just difficult to understand because of complex legal disclaimers. Respondents stated that they would prefer up-front prompting from apps, not just upon download but throughout the user experience. Some also called for more transparency in understanding services' Terms of Use agreements.

"I wish they would provide a clearer breakdown of what information they are keeping track of while using their app. Instead of a long priva[cy] policy that can be hard to interpret." – Kaitlyn, 19

According to the qualitative research, Gen Z'ers put the onus on apps, platforms, and sites to provide tools to encourage digital citizenship and to clearly outline their procedures and consequences for ensuring a positive digital environment.

The qualitative research also underscores that these tools, when they are available, are not always easy to find or navigate. Gen Z'ers recommend that online platforms consider streamlining descriptions and proactively highlighting safety tools and their benefits during initial set-up. Reminders and refresh messages regarding safety considerations may also be appreciated by teens and young adults who lead busy, distracted lives. It will be important to emphasize *why* using these tools is crucial and important to share with peers.

Generation Z shows an openness to being part of a digital ecosystem that is collaborative. If online platforms can do more, it may also encourage young users to act as better digital citizens themselves.

Personal experience on social media generally positive, but discomfort still widespread

"Most Interactions I have On Social Media Are Positive"

90%
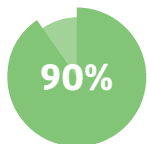
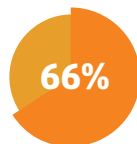"I Feel Uncomfortable On Social Media Sometimes"

66%

Figure 8

According to Gen Z'ers, their personal interactions (90%) and the content they see on social media (73%) is mostly positive. That said, two-thirds of Gen Z'ers (66%) feel "uncomfortable" at least some of the time that they spend on these platforms.

The majority (55%) are uncomfortable with the amount of information available about them online.

Most Gen Z'ers (60%) trust companies to be responsible with their personal data, but only 14% strongly feel this way.

With social media companies specifically, Gen Z'ers who have accessed social media recently are somewhat divided on the companies' ability to protect users' personal data (e.g., age, location, contact information.)

Almost six in ten (59%) agree that platforms are doing a good job while 41% disagree. Just over one in ten (11%) strongly feel that the platforms are doing a good job.

78% of Gen Z'ers who use social media agree that platforms don't do enough to punish users who abuse their platforms (e.g., predators, bullies, scammers). About a third (32%) strongly feel this way.

"I think all social platforms should encourage people to be good digital citizens and they have a responsibility to their users to have community guidelines and ensure that they are followed." – Bea, 24

At the time of survey, only 56% of Gen Z social media users were aware of any safety tools within the social media platforms that they use most, 44% were not aware of any safety tools. Among those who were aware, most (69%) express at least some satisfaction with these tools, but only 19% are very satisfied.

Qualitatively, the top reasons why Gen Z reported dissatisfaction with the currently available tools include: not enough follow-up by companies, tools being ineffective, and just generally not enough tools.

From the parents' perspective

When it comes to technology use, social media, and online safety issues, parents lean in same direction.

Parents make a similar and clear distinction between the impact social media has on their household as compared to young people broadly or society in general. By and large, parents seem to have accepted the role social media plays in their children's lives and generally feel the online interactions and content viewed by their own children is positive. Underneath this acceptance, there are also signs of personal tension or futility. Most parents admit to being nervous and cynical (more than their teenagers are) about the amount of information that is available online about their children. Half of parents still believe their children's safety is "at risk" when they are on the Internet.

Like Gen Z'ers, parents depict the younger generation as being too hooked on technology, don't see social media as having bettered society or young people's lives, and in fact describe social media as being "harmful to young people."

Moreover, parents are even less sure (than teens themselves) on how to keep their kids safe as they navigate the online world and less certain where they should turn for tools that could help. They are less likely to trust companies to take care of this data and use it responsibly. Awareness of current safety tools (and satisfaction) is modest and shows clear room for improvement. Like teens, only one-quarter of parents are very satisfied with the safety tools that are in place on social media sites right now. Over half of parents (52%) who have safety measures in place think their children try to work around them and are savvy enough to do so.

Three-quarters of parents take steps to ensure that their children "unplug" for at least a few hours every week (78%). A large majority of parents of kids under 18 who spend time online feel that the younger generation is too dependent on technology (81%).

Nearly two-thirds of parents with a child under the age of 18 who uses the Internet say that child also uses social media (63%).

Among this group, the majority of parents are comfortable with their children using social media (72%) and feel most of the content their children see on social media is positive (65%).

However, even more than teens themselves, these parents believe that their children use social media too often (66%) and that their usage has gone up over the past year (76%).

Almost three-quarters of parents with children under the age of 18 (72%) believe that social media is harmful to young people.

Most parents don't feel that social media has had a positive impact on young people in general (69%) or society overall (69%).

Nearly three in four parents of kids who spend time online (71%) are not comfortable with the level of information that is available about their children online (compared to 60% of young adults and 50% of teens). Half of parents (50%) worry that their children's personal safety is at risk.

Parents with children under the age of 18 are more likely to say they don't have access to the information necessary to manage their children's personal online safety (50%). A slight majority of parents feel overwhelmed (55%) and admit they can't keep up with the changes happening online (62%).

Compared to Gen Z, parents are less trusting of what companies are doing; less than half (48%) feel that companies will be responsible with their children's personal data. A majority of parents (59%) are at least somewhat satisfied with the safety tools that are available within the platform(s) that their children use, though only 24% are very satisfied.

Role and responsibility of parents

Managing children's online safety is part of a parent's job, even if it's outside their comfort zone.

Gen Z and parents alike agree that parents play the most critical role in educating their children about the potential risks of being online. However, this active and necessary collaboration between parents and Gen Z'ers around technology is fraught with some challenges, most commonly an information overload for parents, who feel behind the curve.

Most parents describe their level of knowledge to be on par with their peers, but half say they learn more from their children about online safety than they teach. Gen Z'ers, especially young adults who have had more years of experience on the Internet, overwhelmingly agree that they are more online-savvy than their parents. Over half of parents don't feel like they can keep pace with the changes happening online and admit they are overwhelmed by the process of keeping their children safe.

Given their varied Internet expertise and the perceived risks, most parents with children under the age of 18 remain somewhat, but not overwhelmingly, confident in their ability to keep their children safe when spending time online. They choose to play an active role in guiding their children's online experience by instituting restrictions such as unplugging time and general safety tools. As noted, however, satisfaction with these currently available safety tools is only moderate, especially among parents.

Parents remain the most used resource for teens and young adults to learn about online safety (70%), though understandably far more relevant for teens than young adults (85% vs. 58%).

Parents almost universally agree (87%) that they should take the lead on teaching their children about online safety.

Nearly three in four parents with children under the age of 18 (72%) are confident in their ability to keep their children safe when spending time online, though only 24% strongly feel this way.

Most also feel overwhelmed by the process (55%), admit they struggle to keep up with the changes happening online (59%), and don't feel they have access to the information necessary to manage their children's personal online safety (50%).

Gen Z still feel parents are by far the top resource used for online safety, even for young adults
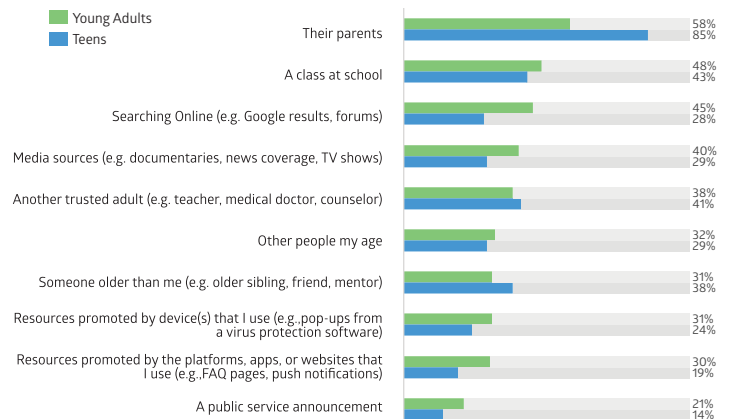Most relied on resource to learn about online safety

Figure 9

When it comes to online safety education, parents and Gen Z'ers are also divided on who is in reality the student and who is the teacher.

Three-quarters of Gen Z'ers (74%) believe that they are more online-savvy than their parents (even more so young adults at 81% vs. teens at 65%).

50% of parents agree that they learn more from their children than they teach in return.

While parents generally feel they are on par (52%) or even more online-savvy (36%) than their own parenting peers, far fewer feel they are equally (32%) or more savvy (20%) than today's generation of young people.

When it comes to online safety specifically, more Gen Z'ers (61%) feel they currently teach their parents more than their parents teach them (again young adults 69% more than teens at 51%).

The vast majority of parents of kids under 18 (83%) trust their children to behave responsibly when they spend time online, although 77% have still put online safety measures in place.

Just over half of parents (59%) are at least somewhat satisfied with the safety tools that are available within the platform(s) that their children use. (By contrast, only 24% of parents and 22% of teens are *very* satisfied).

In closing

While the technical and social terrain of young people's digital lives may be complicated, we see that there is interest, aptitude, and willingness to continue trying to make the online world a better and safer place.

Generation Z is a highly connected, forward-looking cohort that has grown up online and is committed to being part of the changes and fast-paced life that technology offers. While there is division around the large-scale impacts of social media use, they show confidence in their ability to control their personal space in the digital ecosystem.

Doubts among both parents and young people when it comes to keeping up with the safety challenges that go along with digital life turns the narrative to partnership. Kids and parents are learning from each other about the best ways to move through the online world, and their feedback about what remains difficult can provide industry with better blueprints to continue creating solutions.

Full methodology

This study was conducted across three key components by The Harris Poll on behalf of the Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI).

The qualitative survey was conducted online within the United States during June 22-24, 2021, among 12 teenagers aged 13 to 17 and 12 young adults aged 18 to 24 via The Harris Poll's online bulletin board research platform. Participants were those who indicated they engaged in online activities including the Internet, mobile phones, and other digital usage; had a working computer with a webcam and smart phone; and spent at least five hours/week online (when combining all their online activities).

The findings contained in this report from that phase of the study are qualitative in nature. They are derived from a small sample of specially recruited respondents and, as such, are not projectable to a larger population. They should be considered directional rather than conclusive.

The hypotheses and proposed messages in this study were further explored via the following quantitative research to test, validate, and add texture to the qualitative findings.

The quantitative Gen Z survey was conducted online within the United States during August 11-23, 2021, among 500 teenagers aged 13 to 17 and 500 adults aged 18 to 24. For teens, figures for age, within gender, race/ethnicity, parents' education, region, size of household, school location (urbanicity) and weekly Internet usage, were statistically weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. For young adults, figures for age within gender, race/ethnicity, region, household income, education, size of household, and marital status. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for young adults' propensity to be online.

The quantitative Parents survey was conducted online within the United States during August 31 – September 2, 2021, among 2,076 adults (aged 18 and over) via its Harris On Demand omnibus service. The survey focused on the response from 548 parents of children under 18 who spend time online. Figures for age within gender, race/ethnicity, region, household income, education, size of household, and marital status were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the selected U.S. population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the online panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

Chart citations

Figure 1
Greater time online leads to greater consternation
On average, how many hours each day do you spend on social media (e.g., scrolling, posting, watching content)?
How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
["I feel I spend too much time on social media"]

Figure 2
Entertainment and passing the time are main reason for Gen Z accessing social media; differences exist between teens and young adults
Which of the following are reasons why you use social media? Please select all that apply.

Figure 3
About two thirds only show best selves on social media
How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
["I only show my best self on social media"]

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
["The world or content I see on social media doesn't reflect how things really are"]

How often do you feel each of the following when you use social media?
["Fake"]

Figure 4
Teens cast much more positive light on social media than young adults
Do you associate each of following characteristics with social media?
How often do you feel each of the following when you use social media?

Figure 5
Social media seen as having bigger negative impact on others
In general, how much of a positive or negative impact do you think social media has had on each of the following groups?
["Society"]
["People around my age"]
["Myself"]

Figure 6
Strong enjoyment while using social media, yet half still fear for personal safety online
How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
["I like using social media"]

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
["Overall, I don't believe that my personal online safety is at risk"]

In general, how safe or unsafe do you feel when spending time online (e.g., using social media, making a purchase from a website)?
[Very safe]
[Somewhat safe]
[Somewhat unsafe]
[Very unsafe]

Figure 7
Gen Z overwhelmingly supports the concept of digital citizenship
At a high level, digital citizenship is defined as the responsible use of technology (e.g., digital devices, Internet, computer software) when interacting with others. That responsibility may apply to safety, privacy, or having kind and positive conduct when using technology.
How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
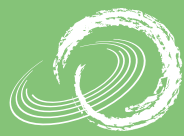["Digital citizenship is important to me"]

Figure 8
Personal experience on social media generally positive, but discomfort still widespread
How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about social media?
["Overall, my personal interactions on social media are positive"]
["Most of the content (e.g., posts, comments, videos) that I see on social media is positive"]
How often do you feel each of the following when you use social media?
["Uncomfortable"]

Figure 9
Gen Z still feel parents are by far the top resource used for online safety, even for young adults
From which of the following resources do you remember learning about online safety (e.g., data privacy, accessing safety tools)?

Family
Online Safety
Institute