



Family
Online Safety
Institute

2021 Research Report Executive Summary



Managing the Narrative

Young People's Use of Online Safety Tools

Conducted by



The Harris Poll

Sponsored by



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.

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 contained to 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.

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.
 - Overwhelmingly, Gen Z'ers (89%) say they like using social media.
 - 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



56%

Over half admit they spend too much time on social media

Figure 1

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

- 83% of Gen-Z'ers feel at least somewhat safe when they spend time online, but only 18% feel very safe.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

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

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%).



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.

When it comes to online safety education, parents and Gen Z are also divided on the reality of who is 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 81% vs. teens 65%).
- While parents generally feel they are on par (52%) or even more online savvy (36%) than their 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 51%).
- 50% of parents agree that they learn more from their children than they teach in return.

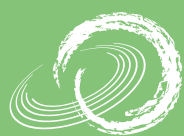
"A few times they tried to put screen time and a few other monitoring tools on my devices, which ended up preventing my learning. So I took them off, and they eventually gave up trying to control me because I had learned to control my safety better than they could."

– Graham, 15

"My parents' solution would be to not use social media at all, so there are tons of differences. I know how to apply [safety tools] unlike my parents, and I know how to use technology more effectively with those precautions."

– Isabella, 15





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