

Beyond a Single Story:

Understanding Young People's Digital Experiences

2025

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REPORT INFORMATION: Beyond a Single Story: Understanding Young People's Digital Experiences
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Overview

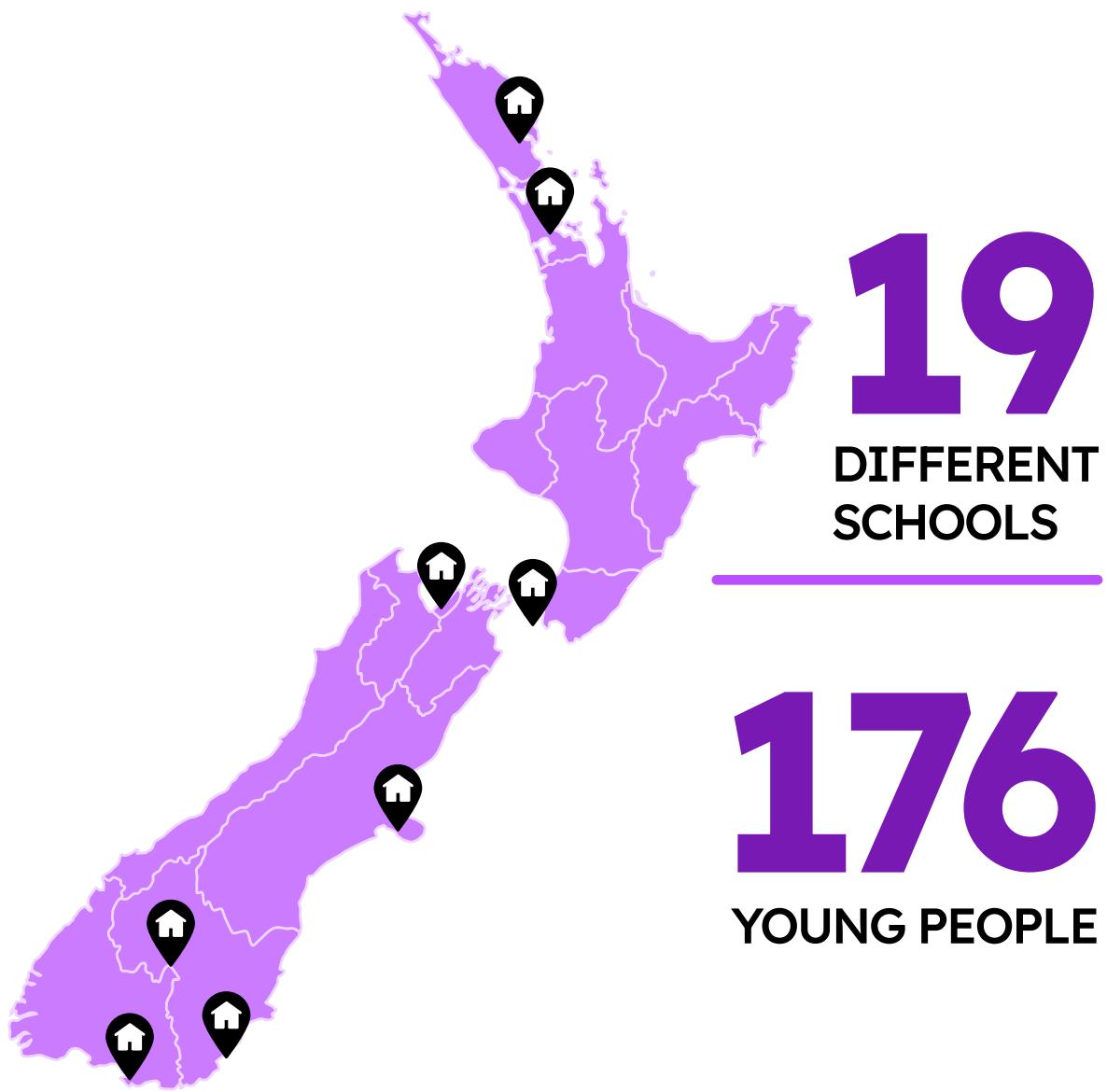
As part of a national roadshow supported by the Spark Foundation in partnership with Te Ara Tīrama, Netsafe facilitated 8 workshops across the country.

176 young people aged 13-15 took part from 19 different schools in half day workshops hosted in Whangarei, Auckland, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Dunedin, Invercargill, and Cromwell.

The purpose was clear and important: **to build an accurate, grounded understanding of young people's online lives by hearing directly from them about what they do, what they experience and what matters to them.**

Too often, there is an assumption that all teens are using the same platforms in the same ways, or that their experiences are predictable based on gender or age.

The roadshow was designed to uncover a fuller, more accurate picture of young people's online lives, and to see whether their experiences are far more varied than the single story we often assume



Representation Matters

Across Aotearoa, the young people most affected by online challenges are often the least represented when decisions about digital wellbeing are made. To better reflect the realities of a wider group of teens, Netsafe partnered with Te Ara Tīrama, with support from the Spark Foundation, to engage directly with students who are usually overlooked, bringing their experiences and perspectives to the centre of this project.

The workshops focused on students aged 13 to 16, a group that organisations rarely involve when seeking insight into young people's online lives. Engagement often centres on older senior students who hold leadership roles and who may, consciously or not, reflect what they believe adults expect of them. Their experiences can sit quite differently from those of younger teens. By working directly with this younger group, the project uncovered insights that more accurately represent the everyday online realities of many more young people across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Students were also told that their input would be taken forward, not left behind. Their ideas were collated and shared back with them, with their schools, with Netsafe and in wider settings where youth perspectives are often absent. This follow-through, which is not standard practice in youth engagement, showed clearly that their contributions mattered and would shape work beyond the workshop.

In total, students from 19 schools across New Zealand took part, spanning both the North and South Islands. These schools included small rural high schools, larger secondary schools, single sex and co-educational settings, colleges, and faith-based schools.

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The Workshops

Each workshop was structured to give students the chance to share their experiences in their own way. Rather than asking for short survey answers, students were invited to respond to four guiding prompts. They could choose to write, list, draw, sketch or use symbols so that a wide range of voices and styles were captured. Facilitators were also on hand to scribe for students who preferred to talk rather than write, making sure everyone had a way to take part.

The workshops were set up to encourage comfort and creativity. Snacks were available on the table, alongside fidget toys, post its, large sheets of paper for thinking and doodling, and a range of coloured markers and stickers. These small but deliberate choices helped create a relaxed setting where students felt they could contribute openly and in their own style.

The four guiding prompts were:

- **Tell us about your time online.** Where do you go? (apps, games, chats, comment sections, websites).
- **What do you get out of your time online?** (connection, creativity, escape, learning, or something else).
- **If you could change one thing about being online, what would it be?** (how platforms are designed, what people can say, how reporting works, what shows up first).
- **What message do you have for the people in charge?** (adults, decision makers, platform creators).

Every response was transcribed and categorised so that themes and patterns could be identified.

Where ideas were expressed visually, photographs were taken to preserve their meaning and representative photographs were also collected to show the range of feedback and experiences.

Students were told clearly how their responses would be used and who would see them. All feedback was anonymised, with only regional variation coded. They knew their contributions were for a purpose, that they had meaning and that what they shared mattered.

This approach created the conditions for students to speak honestly and in their own voice. It moved away from adult-driven formats and instead made room for the complexity of their online lives to come through.

Q1

THE DATA

Question One: Tell us about your time online

The first question asked students to map or describe the places they go online. This was designed to surface the range of apps, platforms, games and spaces that make up their everyday digital lives.

By starting here, we wanted to challenge the assumption that young people's online activity can be neatly defined by age or gender.

Some students listed or drew specific platforms, others mapped how their time online shifted across the day, while some described themes such as chatting, searching or gaming without naming apps. This variety reinforced the core finding of the workshops: there is no single pattern that captures the online lives of young people.

To make sense of the responses, analysis was carried out in three main ways:

- **By platform** when specific apps, games or sites were named or drawn.
- **By age group** when students disclosed their age.
- **By theme** when responses focused on activities or experiences rather than particular platforms.

Where students broke down their online use into timings, for example how many hours they spent online each day or what times of day they were most active, these were also recorded.

Analysis of Question One

A total of 176 students responded to the first question. Their answers showed both clear patterns of popular use and a remarkable breadth of variation.

The analysis below is presented in two layers. First, the overall breakdown from all 176 responses is shown. Second, additional age-based insights are included, drawn from the 96 students (55 percent) who shared their age. This allows us to see both the general patterns across the whole group and the differences that emerge at particular ages.

Age data

Not every student shared their age. Out of the 176 participants, 96 students (55 percent) provided their age.

- **1 student (1 percent)** was 12 years old
- **29 students (30 percent)** were 13 years old
- **33 students (34 percent)** were 14 years old
- **27 students (28 percent)** were 15 years old
- **4 students (4 percent)** were 16 years old
- **2 students (2 percent)** were 17 years old



Q1

Most frequently mentioned platforms (1 in 3 students or more)



YouTube/YouTube Shorts
44% (77 students)



TikTok 43%
(75 students)



Snapchat 42%
(74 students)



Instagram 36%
(63 students)

These four platforms were the most frequently named, with each used by between one third and just under half of the students who took part. The figures show that these apps are important, but not universal. This is a crucial distinction.

Public debate often treats platforms like TikTok or Snapchat as if they are used by all young people, but the reality is more complex. Even the most visible platforms reach fewer than half of this nationally diverse group of students.

Why is this important?

The data challenges the assumption there is a single, standardised teen online experience centred only on the 'big four' platforms. While these apps are highly influential, large numbers of students are not using them. Any policy or education response that assumes universal use, risks overlooking significant groups of young people and their actual digital lives.

Regularly mentioned (around 1 in 5 students)



WhatsApp 23%
(41 students)



Spotify 20%
(36 students)

WhatsApp and Spotify were both identified by around one in five students. They sit below the 'big four' but remain significant parts of many teens' online lives.

Age insights:

- **13 year olds (n=29):** WhatsApp 55%, Spotify 34%
- **14 year olds (n=33):** WhatsApp 39%, Spotify 36%
- **15 year olds (n=27):** WhatsApp 52%, Spotify 33%
- **16–17 year olds (n=6):** WhatsApp 50%, Spotify not mentioned

Why is this important?

WhatsApp is especially strong among younger teens, showing how important private messaging can be when access to other social media is limited. Its steady presence across older ages reinforces that it remains a trusted communication tool.

Spotify appears less often in older groups, but this may also reflect its ubiquity rather than reduced use. Music streaming is so embedded in daily life that some students may not even think of it as 'online.' This "matters because it reminds us that what students choose not to name can be just as revealing as what they do."

Q1

Widely used but less universal (about 1 in 10 to 1 in 6 students)



Netflix – 16%
(29 students)



Pinterest – 16%
(28 students)



Messages or texts – 16%
(28 students)



Facebook – 12%
(21 students)

These platforms were used by around one in ten to one in six students. Together they highlight the variety in how young people shape their online lives, beyond the most obvious social media apps.

Age insights:

- **12 year old (n=1):** Netflix 100%
- **13 year olds (n=29):** Netflix 41%, texts 21%, Messenger Kids 10%
- **14 year olds (n=33):** Pinterest 33%, Netflix 30%, texts 27%, Facebook 12%
- **15 year olds (n=27):** Netflix 37%, Pinterest 26%, texts 19%
- **16-17 year olds (n=6):** Messenger 17%, Google 17%

Why is this important?

This cluster highlights the spread of different interests that sit outside the most visible platforms. Streaming,

visual creativity, simple messaging and family-linked networks all appear, but none with more than 16 percent of students.

Facebook, often dismissed by teens as “for old people,” still features for a minority, likely because of practical functions such as Marketplace. The relatively modest percentages across this group reinforce that beyond the top tier of apps, there is no single ‘second tier’ shaping teen life.

Instead, the picture is one of fragmentation, where smaller groups use different tools that fit their own interests and routines.

Distinctive communities

AO3 (Archive of Our Own) 4% (7 students).

AO3 stood out as a unique space for creative writing, fan fiction and identity exploration. While smaller in scale, its presence highlights how some teens seek participatory and expressive communities outside the mainstream platforms.

Niche or individual mentions

Students also listed more than 40 additional apps and sites, most only once or twice.

These included:

- **Creative tools:** Capcut, Ibis Paint, Pixelart, Flipclip
- **Education and productivity:** Google Docs, Google Classroom, Duolingo, Education Perfect, Visual Studio
- **Faith-based:** KJV Bible app, Jehovah’s Witness app
- **Specialist interests:** Webtoon, Crunchyroll, ESPN Cricket, Ultimate Guitar, RNZ, The Guardian

Q1

Gaming as a Distinct Theme

Gaming was one of the strongest strands of online life identified in the workshops.

Across the 176 students, there were 87 direct mentions of specific games and a further 19 responses where students described their time online only in broad terms such as *gaming*, *video games*, *mobile games*, or *making and playing games*. Taken together, this places gaming at a scale comparable with some of the most widely used platforms like WhatsApp, Spotify and Netflix.

The range of titles shows that gaming is not one culture but many. Students move between global platforms like Roblox and Minecraft, competitive multiplayer games such as Fortnite and Clash Royale, and highly individualised choices from Block Blast to niche single-player titles.

Most frequently mentioned titles:



Roblox 16% (28 students)



Minecraft 6% (11 students)



Block Blast 6% (10 students)



Clash Royale 4% (7 students)



Fortnite 4% (7 students)

Other titles and platforms (smaller numbers):

- Pokemon Games/Go (4), Call of Duty (3), Fifa (3), Brawl Stars (3)
- Celeste (2), STEAM (2)
- World of Warcraft, Genshin Impact, Five Nights at Freddy's, Among Us, Marvel Rivals, Spiderman, NBA2K, GTA 5, Rocket League, Kingdom Come, Session Skate Sim, Gran Turismo, Deliverance II, FR Legends drifting game, Cookie Clicker, Cats & Soup, Snake, Puppy Playtime, Wii Games (all 1 student each)

Age variation adds further insight:

- **12-year-olds (n=1):** Wrote 'gaming' rather than naming specific titles.
- **13-year-olds (n=29):** Roblox was most common (31%). Smaller numbers mentioned Block Blast, Call of Duty and a wide spread of individual games, showing early experimentation across genres.
- **14-year-olds (n=33):** Roblox remained high (30%), alongside Minecraft (18%) and Fortnite (15%). Discord also appeared for 12%, highlighting its role as a social extension of gaming.
- **15-year-olds (n=27):** Roblox was still present (26%) but fewer individual games were listed. Four students (15%) wrote only 'gaming,' suggesting the activity itself had become normalised.
- **16–17-year-olds (n=6):** Very few gaming mentions appeared. One wrote 'video games' and one named Discord. This may not reflect reduced play but rather how routine gaming has become by older ages.

Q1

Gaming as identity in its own right

19 responses described parts of time online using only broad terms such as *gaming*, *video games*, *mobile games*, or *making and playing games*.

Rather than listing titles, these students used the category itself to capture their experience.

This matters for several reasons:

- **Normalisation:** Gaming was described in the same way others wrote *social media* or *chatting*. This shows it is not viewed as a special activity but as a routine part of being online.
- **Multiplicity:** Using broad terms may reflect the shifting variety of games they play across devices and genres. No single title can capture that fluidity, so the umbrella term *gaming* felt more accurate.
- **Identity:** Choosing *gaming* as the descriptor signals that the category itself carries meaning. For some, identifying with *gaming* is a way of saying ‘this is who I am online,’ not just what I do.
- **Social dimension:** Importantly, *gaming* is rarely just about playing. In-game chat, guilds, friend lists and collaborative play create spaces of belonging that rival those found on social media platforms. Describing time online as *gaming* may therefore also be shorthand for describing where friendships are maintained and communities are built.

Why is this important?

These responses suggest that for some students, *gaming* is both every day and social. It is not only entertainment but a space where identity, friendships and belonging take shape.

This insight is supported by wider research. Netsafe has found that gaming is a major way young people connect socially in New Zealand. Common Sense Media in the US reports that most teens who game use it to connect with friends, and the Australian eSafety Commissioner notes that multiplayer games and in-game chat are key spaces for peer interaction.

Taken together, this shows that *gaming* is not only an activity but a dimension of social life that adults often underestimate when focusing narrowly on social media platforms.

Netsafe has found that gaming is a major way young people connect socially in New Zealand.



Q1

Discord deserves intentional attention.

Identified by 16 students (9%), it offers chat, voice and streaming features that fit naturally into gaming environments. Moderation on Discord happens at the server level rather than across the platform, which means responsibility often falls to whoever created and manages the group.

In some cases, these organisers may be young people themselves.

Safety research highlights several risks. Moderating real-time voice conversations is difficult, which leaves gaps in oversight. Discord is made up of millions of servers, each with its own culture and rules, making consistent safety standards nearly impossible to apply.

Default privacy settings can allow unwanted contact from strangers unless actively changed. Its strong link to gaming also means harmful or extreme content can appear within spaces that look like ordinary play.

Why is this important?

Discord matters because it shows that some young people are spending time in online spaces where safety and culture are shaped from the inside rather than enforced by the platform itself. Students recognised its value for connection and gaming and even mentioned it as an alternative to social media if restrictions were introduced.

This makes it important not only because of the risks of harmful or extreme content, but because it highlights how young people may be navigating and moderating their own digital communities. For adults, educators and policymakers, this challenges the assumption that all online experiences are shaped by highly visible, company-controlled platforms like TikTok or Instagram.

Ignoring gaming and platforms like Discord that support it would mean overlooking one of the most significant ways young people connect, create and define themselves online.



DATA NOTE: No gender data was collected in this study, so these findings cannot show how gaming use or platform choices may differ between male, female or gender diverse students.

Q2

THE DATA

Question Two: What do you get out of your time online?

Adults often assume that teenagers spend their time online scrolling aimlessly or wasting hours without purpose. The perception that “nothing good” comes from this time is a common theme in media debates and family conversations. To test this assumption, students were asked directly what they get out of being online. The question was designed to move past stereotypes and to understand the benefits and meaning they see in their own digital lives.

A total of 174 students responded to this question. Students were free to list as many things as they wanted, so individual answers often appear across multiple themes.

The answers revealed four main themes:



Connection & Communication

keeping in touch with friends, family and communities.



Finding Out, Figuring Out, Making Sense

discovery, learning, inspiration and study.



Entertainment

fun, escape, music, laughter and filling time.



Sharing

creativity, self-expression, self-care and belonging.

Together, these themes show that young people do not see their time online as one-dimensional. Instead, it provides a mix of connection, discovery, enjoyment and personal growth.

DATA NOTE: Students were free to list as many things as they wanted, so individual answers often appear across multiple themes. This means the percentages shown for each theme do not add up to 100 percent. Instead, they illustrate the spread of different ways students described value in their online lives.

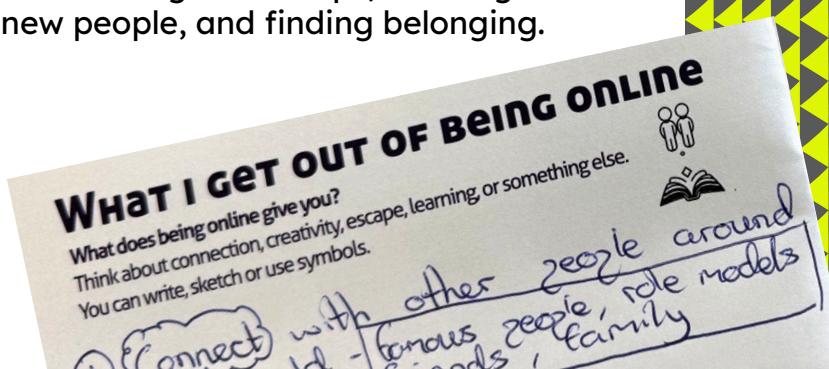
THEMES THAT EMERGED



Connection & Communication

- 106 responses
- 61% of all responses

The majority described connection as a key part of what they get out of being online. This makes it the largest theme overall. Students most often wrote *connection* or *communication* directly, but many also explained what that meant for them: keeping in touch with family, maintaining friendships, meeting new people, and finding belonging.



Q2

CONNECTION & COMMUNICATION SUB THEMES



Friendships (41 responses)

- 24 percent of all 174
- 39 percent of Connection

Literal answers included “friends,” “*talking to friends*,” “*connection with friends*,” “*contact with friends*.”

“Talking with friends after school or that live far away, maintaining friendships from a distance, calling my parents, organising things, making a calendar.”

“Being online helps me make friends when I’m too nervous in person.”

Friendships were the largest strand of connection. Students described not only chatting with existing friends but also sustaining friendships across distance and overcoming social barriers.

Online platforms offered continuity, making it easier to stay in touch daily and even to connect when face-to-face interaction was hard.



Just ‘Connection or Communication’ (31 responses)

- 18 percent of all 174 responses
- 29 percent of Connection

Literal answers included *connection*, *communication*, and short phrases like *connection: friends, family, community*.

Writing only connection or communication shows how students see these as the very definition of being online. For them, digital spaces are first and foremost about being linked to others.

This is not framed as an extra benefit but as the baseline expectation. The simplicity of their answers highlights how connectivity has become embedded in daily life, to the point where it feels as fundamental as being present in person.



Family contact (22 responses)

- 13 percent of all 174
- 21 percent of Connection

Literal answers included “*keeping in contact with friends and family*,” “*connection to family*,” “*contacts with family*.”

“With messages and WhatsApp I connect with my family in other countries.”

“It gives me connection to my whanau, who ALL live in the North Island and connection to my old friends after we moved.”

Family contact was especially important for students with relatives living overseas or in different parts of New Zealand. Online spaces allowed them to sustain relationships across distance and keep daily contact alive.

This shows the role of digital tools in maintaining intergenerational and cross-regional ties.

Q2



Meeting new people and belonging (12 responses)

- 7 percent of all 174
- 11 percent of Connection

Literal answers included “relationships,” “connect with people,” “I can talk to people that I am not able to in real life.”

“Being online lets me interact with other people like me and make friends with people in different cities and countries.”

“Able to talk with friends of people in my fandoms.”

This group described connection as expanding their world. For these students, online spaces offered belonging through fandoms, shared interests or international friendships.

This strand shows how digital life allows teens to find community where they may not feel it offline.



Everyday organising (7 responses)

- 4 percent of all 174
- 7 percent of Connection

Literal answers included “organising catch ups with friends,” “making a calendar,” “arranging hangouts.”

Some students valued the practical side of communication. Online platforms acted as tools for scheduling, coordinating and keeping social life running.

This shows that for teens, being online is not only social but also logistical, making everyday relationships easier to maintain.



Mixed expressions (8 responses)

- 5 percent of all 174
- 8 percent of Connection

Literal answers included combinations like “laughter and connection,” “news and socials to help me connect with the world,” “comfort, included, connected, happy, sad.”

These responses blur categories, combining connection with joy, information, or feelings of inclusion. They illustrate that for some students; communication online is not just functional but deeply tied to emotion and identity.

Why is this theme important?

Connection was the single largest theme, with nearly two-thirds of students naming it in some form. For some, it was captured in a single word. For others, it meant family ties, friendships, belonging, or the simple logistics of keeping life organised. Taken together, these responses show that connection is not an optional extra of being online but its beating heart. It is what makes digital spaces meaningful, bridging distance, sustaining relationships and opening communities that might otherwise be out of reach.

61%

described CONNECTION as a key part of what they get out of being online.

Q2

THEMES THAT EMERGED:

Finding Out, Figuring Out, Making Sense

- 104 responses
- 60% of all responses

Learning, discovery and curiosity made up the second largest theme, after connection. Yet the picture painted by students was far broader than what adults often imagine.

It was not limited to schoolwork or assignments. Students described gaining practical skills, everyday knowledge, sparks of inspiration, pathways into future study, and even ways of looking after themselves. This breadth shows that 'learning online' cannot be reduced to homework help or Googling facts.

For young people, it is about making sense of the world around them and building confidence in who they are becoming.

FINDING OUT, FIGURING OUT, MAKING SENSE SUB THEMES

Practical skills and hobbies (32 responses)

- 18 percent of all 174 responses
- 31 percent of the 104 in this theme

Students talked about building hands-on skills through digital spaces. These stretched across sport, music, technology and art.

"Learning new tricks for skiing, skateboarding, mountain biking and trampolining."

"I get communication, discussion tools and support to help me with code."

Online spaces functioned as workshops and rehearsal rooms. Teens were not just watching content; they were actively using digital tools to extend their offline passions.

This challenges the assumption that online time displaces real life. For many students, it was directly feeding into their physical abilities, creative practice and confidence.

Random knowledge and life hacks (27 responses)

- 16 percent of all 174 responses
- 26 percent of the 104 in this theme

This group valued curiosity and everyday discovery.

"I learn a lot about the world in general."

"I get life hacks."

"Getting ideas for things in my own life. Seeing others' ideas and lives."

These responses highlight curiosity and breadth.

Teens are picking up knowledge that is practical, personal and sometimes unconventional. Adults may dismiss quick tips or TikTok videos as trivial, but for students they provide accessible pathways into skills and wellbeing advice that matter in their everyday lives.

Q2

Practical skills and hobbies continued

Instead, they pick up ideas in passing that improve their daily lives, shape habits, or spark new interests. This incidental learning is invisible to adults but central to how young people make sense of the world around them.



School and study (26 responses)

- 15 percent of all 174 responses
- 25 percent of the 104 in this theme

Study emerged as a clear strand, described in diverse and purposeful ways.

“It allows me to research ANYTHING necessary for school and work that then works towards improving my grades via revision/research.”

“I’m introduced to the study options that can make it easier for me to learn about a certain subject and being introduced job options. And how I can work towards it.”

“Information – how to. Learning and recording – Docs, school website, teams.”

Across this theme, students described study in layered and varied ways. Some focused on practical support for assignments and grades, others highlighted exploration of future pathways and careers, while others emphasised the everyday reliance on school-linked platforms and digital tools.

The quotes above capture these strands, but they sit within a wider set of study-related responses that show how online and offline learning are now deeply intertwined.

For these students, study online was not optional. It was integral. This reframes education as a hybrid system where digital resources and school learning are inseparable.



Inspiration (13 responses)

- 7 percent of all 174 responses
- 13 percent of the 104 in this theme

Some students described how online spaces provided sparks that fuelled creativity or shaped their projects.

“Pinterest inspo for drawings, prompts, communities.”

“Creative ideas through watching ideas on tiktok – sewing stuff and drawing.”

Inspiration here was closely tied to creative practice.

Teens used platforms like Pinterest and TikTok to gather prompts, try new techniques, and bring fresh ideas into their own artwork or projects. For them, inspiration online was not about passive scrolling but about feeding imagination and experimentation.



Staying informed (9 responses)

- 5 percent of all 174 responses
- 9 percent of the 104 in this theme

A smaller but important group focused on news and awareness.

Q2

“I use social media to stay informed on current events, both in my world and in pop culture.”

“It also gives recent news from trusted sources... Keeps me in the loop.”

For these students, online spaces were not only social or entertaining. They were gateways to civic life, keeping them engaged with politics, global issues and cultural trends.

This challenges the adult narrative that teens are unaware or disengaged. Many are actively seeking trusted sources of information.

Looking after myself (5 responses)

- 3 percent of all 174 responses
- 5 percent of the 104 in this theme

Although smaller in number, these responses showed deep personal meaning.

“Learning coping methods, learning about self-care hair, skin etc.”

“I use my bible app for daily prayers and verses to strengthen my faith.”

For some students, online time supported wellbeing and identity. For some it meant practical advice about self-care, for others it meant spiritual grounding. Digital spaces were companions in navigating health, emotions and belonging.



Creating projects (3 responses)

- 2 percent of all 174 responses
- 3 percent of the 104 in this theme

A very small group described using online platforms to actively create and share their work.

“Creativity – minecraft, sandbox games design.”

“Fashion, information from fashion influence vs instagram. Create pinterest board for creative ideas I have. Selling clothes.”

“Creative outlet – using instagram as an online diary, sharing writing with online community.”

Even within a small set of three responses, the range is striking. From designing in Minecraft, to experimenting with fashion and commerce, to sharing personal writing, these students show that online spaces are not only for inspiration but also for production. For them, the internet is a studio and a stage.

Why is this theme important?

Learning, discovery and curiosity emerged as the single largest theme, yet it looked very different from what adults often imagine. It was not limited to schoolwork or assignments. Students described gaining practical skills, everyday knowledge, sparks of inspiration, pathways into future study, and even ways of looking after themselves.

Q2

60%

described **FINDING OUT, FIGURING OUT, MAKING SENSE** as a key part of what they get out of being online.

THEMES THAT EMERGED:



Entertainment

- 87 responses
- 50% of all responses

Entertainment was the third largest theme, after connection and learning with half of the students including benefits that fall under this category. For many students it was so central that they captured it in a single word: *fun*. At first glance this may seem obvious, but looking deeper reveals its importance.

Entertainment online provided escape, calm, laughter, rhythm, and sometimes even awareness of wider issues. These responses show that enjoyment is not a trivial add-on but a meaningful part of young people's wellbeing and identity. To overlook entertainment is to miss how essential joy, humour and downtime are to their daily lives.

ENTERTAINMENT SUB THEMES



Just "Entertainment/Fun/Amusement" (37 responses)

- 21 percent of all 174 responses
- 43 percent of Entertainment

Many students gave no explanation at all. Their responses were simply the words 'entertainment', 'fun', or in a few cases, 'amusement.'

The choice to write only a single word is significant. It shows that for these students; enjoyment is the most obvious and self-evident value of being online. Fun was treated as so normal and expected that it required no detail or justification. This highlights that online spaces provide something essential for teens: joy, play, and a sense of ease woven into their everyday routines.



Escape and relaxation (23 responses)

- 13 percent of all 174
- 26 percent of Entertainment

Literal answers here included *escape*, *relax*, *zone out*, *wind down*, and *calm*.

"Escape from the world/zone out."

"I am able to escape reality and relax."

These responses show that online entertainment plays an important role in how students manage their wellbeing. Adults often dismiss "escape" as avoidance, but for teens it is described as a constructive way to step back from stress.

Q2

The fact that so many write escape, relax or zone out points to a need for private, low-pressure spaces that are not always available offline. What looks like simple downtime is in fact part of how young people regulate their emotions and protect their mental health.



Music (10 responses)

- 6 percent of all 174
- 11 percent of Entertainment

Literal answers included music, listening to music, and references to music as part of other activities.

“Listening to music while getting ready.”

“Listen to new music/find new songs ideas.”

Only a small group mentioned music directly, but their answers show two patterns: for some it runs in the background, adding rhythm or mood to daily routines, while for others it is the focus, especially when discovering new songs.

Even in this small sample, music appears as both a soundtrack and a standalone form of entertainment, underlining how flexible it is in young people’s lives.



Laughter and joy (8 responses)

- 5 percent of all 174
- 9 percent of Entertainment

Literal answers included *laughter*, *joy*, and *funny videos*.

“Videos to laugh at when feeling low.”

“Give me a break to laugh.”

Though small in number, these responses show humour as more than distraction. Laughter online is described as a lift in difficult moments, a source of positivity, and a way to improve mood. For these students, entertainment is directly tied to wellbeing.



Filling time and boredom (6 responses)

- 3 percent of all 174
- 7 percent of Entertainment

Literal answers included *“something to watch when eating”*, *“keep me busy when I’m bored”*, and *“I get something to do.”*

Entertainment also acts as a companion to downtime. These answers remind us that being online often fills the small gaps of everyday life.



Discovery through entertainment (3 responses)

- 2 percent of all 174
- 3 percent of Entertainment

Literal answers included references to *movies*, *series*, *point-of-view reviews*, *TikTok content*, and *video essays*.

“I also love watching movies and series and I also look for peoples POV on it to see if it’s worth watching.”

Q2

“TikTok helps boost videos of people in need of health care and food - people in Gaza.”

A very small group described entertainment as a doorway to reflection or awareness. For these students, watching content was not only fun but also a way to connect with new perspectives, global issues, and community concerns.

Why does this theme matter?

Entertainment was the third largest theme after learning, and for many students it was so central that they captured it in a single word: fun. At first glance this may seem obvious, but looking deeper reveals its importance. Entertainment online provided escape, calm, laughter, rhythm, and sometimes even awareness of wider issues.

These responses show that enjoyment is not a trivial add-on but a meaningful part of young people's wellbeing and identity. To overlook entertainment is to miss how essential joy, humour and downtime are to their daily lives.

50%

described ENTERTAINMENT as a key part of what they get out of being online.

THEMES THAT EMERGED:



Sharing

- 11 responses
- 6% of all responses

A small percentage described sharing as one of the main things they get out of being online. While smaller than the other three major themes, this cluster highlights the importance of expression and visibility. For these students, online spaces are not just about consuming or connecting but also about putting something of themselves into the world.

SHARING SUB THEMES



Self-expression and voice (6 responses)

- 3 percent of all 174
- 55 percent of Sharing

Literal answers included “creative outlet,” “expressing yourself,” “art and media,” “sharing writing.”

“Creative outlet – using Instagram as an online diary, sharing writing with online community.”

“Gives me a platform to share my own thoughts and opinions which as a 15-year-old I don’t get to do often.”

Q2

Just over half of the Sharing responses emphasised online platforms as spaces to be heard. While some described artistic outlets, others highlighted the ability to share personal thoughts and opinions that may not find expression offline.

This shows that sharing online is not only about creativity but also about agency and recognition as a way for young people to contribute their perspectives and feel their voices matter.



Everyday life and opinions (3 responses)

- 2 percent of all 174
- 27 percent of Sharing

Literal answers included “sharing what you get up to,” “share my life with others,” “share my ideas.”

A smaller group focused on visibility in more personal ways. Sharing everyday life or opinions gave them a sense of being noticed and heard.



Opportunities and causes (2 responses)

- 1 percent of all 174
- 18 percent of Sharing

“Being online opens up many artistic opportunities for me. I create art commissions online and I use my profits for local charities.”

“Instagram: supporting small businesses.”

Two students described sharing as a way to create opportunities or support others, showing its potential to extend beyond personal expression.

Why does this theme matter?

Sharing was the smallest theme, but it still adds an important dimension. For some students it was about creativity and having a voice, for others it was about maintaining closeness and feeling recognised through everyday sharing.

A very small number described opportunities to support causes or small businesses. Together, these responses show that sharing online gives young people visibility and a sense of being heard, even if it is not a priority for most.

6%

described **SHARING** as a key part of what they get out of being online.

Q2

Mixed and Critical Views

Out of 174 students, **20 responses (11 percent)** did not fit neatly into the four major themes.

These were a mix of reflections about self-discovery, balance, novelty, and explicit recognition of negative aspects of being online.

While small in number, these answers are important because they add nuance and highlight that not every student sees their online life as positive.

MIXED AND CRITICAL VIEWS

SUB THEMES

Self-discovery and balance (6 responses)

- 3 percent of all 174
- 30 percent of this theme

Literal answers included “self discovery & community,” “balanced with homework, outdoors stuff and sports,” “I’m open to different things.”

A small group saw value in online life for exploring identity and finding community, while also emphasising balance with offline activities.

These responses highlight the role of the internet in shaping self-understanding, but also a conscious effort among some students to limit or balance their use.

Everyday coping and novelty (4 responses)

- 2 percent of all 174
- 20 percent of this theme

Literal answers included “gives me a break,” “makes me happy,” “I have manipulated my algorithm so I can use it more like Pinterest,” “Cookie Clicker, Cats and Soup make me feel like a capitalist.”

These responses reflect individualised uses of the internet that don’t sit within broader categories.

They show how students adapt platforms to suit themselves, find small joys, or simply pass the time.

Critical or negative experiences (10 responses)

- 6 percent of all 174
- 50 percent of this theme

Literal answers included:

“I don’t get much out of being online.” (2 students)

“You’ll become anti-social and school will get more hard. You’ll hate this.”

“Sore eyes.”

“It can also have a negative impact like cyberbullying/ sending negative stuff to other people.”

Q2

“Time wasted through YouTube, random articles, procrastinating about work, getting distracted from work.”

“I get influenced to buy things which can be helpful but sometimes wasteful and make me feel like a follower.”

These responses remind us that not all students see being online as beneficial.

Some described concrete harms such as distraction, cyberbullying or unwanted commercial influence. Others expressed dissatisfaction, reporting little value or even harm to schoolwork and social life. This strand is significant because it highlights perspectives often overlooked in public discussion, where young people are assumed to be uncritically positive about their online lives.

11%

did not fit neatly into the four major themes.

Why this matters

Although smaller than the main themes, these responses matter because they broaden the picture. Some students used online spaces for self-discovery, balance or small joys, while others were more critical, pointing to wasted time, pressure, or harm.

Including these perspectives ensures the analysis reflects the full range of experiences, not only the dominant positive themes.

Q3

THE DATA

Question Three: If you could change, add, remove or fix one thing about social media...what would it be?

This question gave 172 students the chance to say exactly that. Their answers were not abstract or theoretical. They reflected the daily frustrations, risks, and pressures of real use.

The students who contributed were clear that their priorities do not always align with the fixes adults are debating.

Where adults talk about banning apps, young people talk about fixing broken systems.

Where adults propose higher age cut-offs, young people talk about making age restrictions actually work.

Where adults call for blanket safety settings, young people call for safety as a core design feature, not an afterthought.

DATA NOTE: A total of 172 students responded to this question. Each response was coded into one of five categories: change, fix, remove, add, or other. Some students gave more than one suggestion, so totals do not add to 100 percent.

Change was the largest category, followed by Fix. Remove and Add were smaller but significant, while Other captured a small set of outlier or mixed views.



Change: 68 responses
(40 percent)



Fix: 56 responses
(33 percent)



Remove: 28 responses
(16 percent)



Add: 20 responses
(12 percent)



Other: 11 responses
(6 percent)

THEMES THAT EMERGED:



Change (68 responses, 40 percent)

That this was the largest category is telling. Young people are not asking for tweaks or small adjustments. Almost half of them called for social media to be changed at a structural level. They want core design choices to work differently, with safety, fairness and wellbeing built in from the start.

Q3



CHANGE SUBTHEMES **Safety and moderation**

Safety was the most consistent theme. Students described bullying, predators, scams, fake profiles and explicit content. For them, safety is not a feature to be switched on or off but the baseline that defines whether a platform should exist.

“Making sure it is a safe environment for kids and teens.”

“Fake profiles pretending to be me or people I know.”

“Predators and OmeTV.”

“Cyberbullying and scams make it unsafe to even use sometimes.”

What comes through here is not surprise that risks exist.

Students know harm will appear online. Their anger is directed at platforms that normalise unsafe spaces and fail to treat safety as a basic condition of participation.

For these students, safety is not an “extra feature” parents can switch on. It is the measure of whether a platform deserves to exist. When impersonation, predatory contact and scams are treated as inevitable, the result is not only direct harm but also the erosion of trust.

Adult debates often frame safety in narrow terms, such as blocking harmful categories or introducing parental controls. Students reframed it entirely: safety is a core design principle. They are not asking for more warnings.

They are asking for systems to be rebuilt so safety is guaranteed, not negotiated.

NOTE on OmeTV: OmeTV is a free random video chat platform similar to Omegle, widely criticised for exposing young people to explicit material and predatory contact.



Algorithms and feeds

The second most consistent frustration was with feeds. Students criticised endless ‘brainrot’ content, dangerous viral trends and algorithms that amplify fame and money over creativity or relevance.

“The brainrot and unnecessary things that don’t need to be on there.”

“The insane trends that encourage younger audiences to risk their lives.”

“Stop algorithms prioritising famous people who pay and corporations over smaller creators.”

What is striking is how precisely they diagnose the issue. Their frustration is not with using social media but with how algorithms shape what they see. They described feeling pushed into content they did not choose, including harmful trends that blur the line between entertainment and risk.

Q3

While adults focus on limiting ‘time online,’ students reframed the issue. The problem is not how many hours they spend scrolling, but what fills those hours. They want meaningful feeds, space for smaller voices, and protection from dangerous or trivialising trends.



Reporting systems

Reporting was described as broken. Students said harmful content is left untouched, reports vanish without feedback, and the process feels like an empty gesture.

“Reporting harmful content does not get removed fast enough.”

“When someone is reported they should be carefully evaluated, to prevent unfair blocks but also to stop accounts that cause harm.”

“Improve reporting and blocking so that they get investigated and people would not be allowed back on.”

The frustration here is not that harm exists. Students know it does and have experienced it. It is that platforms promise a pathway to act, then fail to follow through. Reporting is supposed to signal that young people have a voice when something goes wrong. Instead, it teaches them that their concerns can be ignored.

Policymakers often cite reporting as evidence that platforms are responsible. Students called that out as hollow. They want enforcement, accountability and feedback that proves their reports matter.



Age restrictions

Several students focused on age boundaries, but not in the same way adults do. Adults often suggest raising age cut-offs across the board. Students called for better enforcement of existing restrictions and limits on unwanted contact with much older users.

“Restrict and reinforce content for ages from 13 to 25. Use school ID.”

“Make the minimum age stronger, like not letting 8-year-olds on.”

“Make an age max of 60. I am 13.”

The humour in some quotes (“age max of 60”) reflects an underlying discomfort: being in spaces where adults decades older can interact freely with teens.

Adults often debate raising age thresholds from 13 to 15 or 16. Students show the deeper problem is not the number but the lack of enforcement. They described younger children using apps unchecked and content for adults appearing in teen feeds. Raising the minimum age without fixing enforcement solves nothing.



Wellbeing and culture

Finally, many students wanted to change the culture of social media itself. They spoke about filters, body perfection, judgement and negativity.

Q3

“I would change how you can distort and edit yourself to look perfect.”

“Make social media kinder and more supportive.”

“The judgement and hate that comes from putting anything online can ruin people.”

These responses go beyond abstract adult debates about “online harm.” They capture the everyday pressures of comparison, perfectionism and judgement. Students made clear that features like filters and anonymous commenting are not neutral. They actively shape how social media influences self-image and confidence.

While adults often focus on parental responsibility or broad safety messages, students highlight wellbeing as something that should be designed into the platform itself.

What this theme tells us:

The Change responses reinforce a deep dissatisfaction with the fundamentals of social media. Students do not treat bullying, scams, manipulative algorithms or hostile cultures as inevitable. They see them as the result of design choices that put profit and engagement ahead of safety and wellbeing.

They described safety as the baseline of whether a platform should even exist, not as an optional setting. They criticised feeds that flood them with ‘brainrot’ and dangerous trends instead of relevant content. They said reporting systems are empty promises that teach them

their voices do not matter. They pointed out that age restrictions are meaningless if they can be easily bypassed. And they showed how filters, anonymous commenting and toxic cultures shape how they feel about themselves every day.

This cuts directly against adult debates that focus on rules, bans or parental controls. Students are not asking to be pushed out or locked down. They are demanding that platforms be rebuilt so safety, fairness and wellbeing are designed in from the start.

40%

Almost half of responses called for social media **CHANGE** at a structural level

For them, the question is no longer whether social media can be improved.

The question is whether platforms are willing to redesign themselves to be worth young people’s trust.

Q3

THEMES THAT EMERGED



Fix (56 responses, 33 percent)

That a third of all responses sat here shows how clearly students see the gap between what platforms promise and what they deliver. They recognise that tools for safety and wellbeing already exist, but they are frustrated that these tools are ineffective, inconsistent, or deliberately weak. They are asking for platforms to fix the tools they already claim to provide



FIX SUBTHEMES

Reporting & moderation

The most repeated frustration across all categories was reporting. Students said over and over that reporting harmful content, bullying, or unsafe accounts often leads nowhere. Instead of functioning as a safety net, reporting was described as an empty gesture.

“Reporting has to be improved. I have tried to stop bad activity and nothing happened.”

“Taking reporting seriously and actually doing something about bullying.”

“I would make reporting to be checked by humans.”

The frustration behind these quotes is not about the presence of harm, students know that harmful content will appear. Their frustration is with platforms that promise a solution but fail to deliver. Reporting systems

are supposed to signal that young people can act when something goes wrong. When those systems fail, the effect is not only continued exposure to harm but also the erosion of trust.

This insight cuts sharply against adult narratives. Policymakers often highlight reporting as a success story, pointing to how platforms allow users to ‘take action.’ Students make it clear that action without follow-through is meaningless.

They are calling for **enforcement, accountability, and feedback loops** that show their reports matter.



Age restrictions

Students said that age restrictions in their current form are broken. Tick-box age checks and pop-up gates were seen as meaningless. These token measures let companies claim they are protecting young people, but everyone knows they are easy to dodge and do little to change the experience once inside.

“Put age limits on certain apps that actually makes them not allowed on the app.”

They stressed that even if age checks became harder to get around, that would not solve the problem. Blocking under-age users does not stop harmful content, unsafe trends or unwanted contact from appearing in feeds. Stronger barriers on their own miss the real issue.

Q3

Students pointed to what happened in the UK when the Online Safety Act was introduced. Headlines showed a sharp rise in VPN use, and their reaction was, *of course*. To them, this proved that regulation on its own does not fix anything, it just encourages new workarounds.

What they want fixed is credibility and consistency. If a platform sets a minimum age, it should explain why, enforce it in a way that actually works, and make sure the design and content reflect that standard.

Young people believe age restrictions are built to protect companies, not them.



Content exposure

Students described how harmful material slips into feeds far too easily. This was not an occasional accident but something routine.

“Explicit images and videos are too easy to see and access on apps.”

“People can access bad things way too easily.”

“Pornography and gore are accessible to youth.”

For them, the issue is not rare mistakes but a system that treats harmful content as normal. Explicit images, gore and violent videos appeared in feeds as casually as memes or music clips. This normalisation was one of their sharpest criticisms.

What they want fixed is the gap between platform policies and what actually happens. The rules already say that explicit or violent material should be restricted, but in practice it still slips through. Students were clear that protections should not just exist on paper but should actually work in feeds and recommendations.

This is an important contrast with many adult proposals that focus on blanket bans or cutting off access altogether. Students were pragmatic. They expect to use social media, but they want platforms to fix their systems so they stop serving pornography, gore and scams as if they were everyday content.

This is an important contrast with adult proposals, which often focus on blanket bans or cutting off access altogether. Students are pragmatic: they want the right to use social media, but they want it to stop serving them pornography, gore and scams.



Ads and design

Students were clear and understood that platforms are built in ways that capture their attention and make money from their presence. They talked about intrusive advertising, addictive design patterns and feeds that often feel off track from their real interests.

“Reduce the amount of ads on platforms.”

“TikTok gets people easily hooked in.”

Q3

“Focus the feed on more of what we are interested in and keep it age appropriate.”

For them, this went beyond being annoyed by ads. They saw platforms as deliberately designed to keep them online for as long as possible, through endless scrolling, push notifications and highly targeted content. Many said this takes away their sense of control, because their feeds reflect what platforms want rather than what they choose.

Adults often frame the issue as “too much screen time” and suggest blunt fixes such as bans. Students took a different view. The problem is not that they use social media, but that social media is built to use them. The fix they are asking for is fewer intrusive ads, feeds that genuinely reflect their interests, and content that is clearly age appropriate.



Privacy and security

Students said the fix they want is more control over their privacy and visibility online. They described how exposed they feel even when they follow the rules, and how little power they have to decide who can contact them.

“Give more privacy so people I know in real life cannot find me if I do not want them to.”

“Do not allow randoms to message you without permission.”

These comments reveal daily vulnerabilities that broad online safety messages do not capture. For some, the biggest concern was the risk of being contacted against their will.

Adults often focus on parental oversight or national regulation. Students instead focused on practical fixes to platform mechanics: who can search for them, who can message them, and how much control they have over those interactions.

33%

of responses asked for platforms to **FIX** the tools they already claim to provide.

THEMES THAT EMERGED:



Remove (28 responses, 16 percent)

Although fewer students raised this category, their responses were very direct. Unlike the Change or Fix themes, which focused on improving how platforms work, remove responses named the features and behaviours they felt should not exist at all. These were not small adjustments but clear calls to take away what makes platforms unsafe, untrustworthy or hostile.

Q3



REMOVE SUBTHEMES **Harmful behaviours**

A number of students focused on the behaviours that make online spaces feel unsafe. Rather than asking for limits or better controls, they wanted certain harms removed completely.

“Remove negativity, cyberbullying and hate to make social media a better place.”

“Stop scammers and catfishers.”

“Get rid of blackmail and bad people.”

Their message was simple: they did not want bullying reduced or scams contained, they wanted them gone. To them, these behaviours are not just background noise to be managed but violations of what online spaces should be.

Adult proposals often lean on better reporting systems or anti-bullying campaigns. Students saw that as tinkering. Their message was that platforms which allow bullying and exploitation to persist are broken at their core.



Adult content

Students said pornography and sexualised content should not be part of their online spaces.

“Remove all pornography.”

“Ban OnlyFans people.”

“Get rid of porn bots especially on Tumblr.”

They talked about porn bots and explicit posts as invasive and unwanted. Porn was described as something that pushed into their feeds and disrupted their spaces, not something they were looking for.

What stood out is that they did not see porn as just another part of being online. Adults sometimes treat exposure to pornography as unavoidable, but students rejected that. They saw it as harmful and out of place, and they expected platforms to take responsibility for keeping it away.

Instead of warnings or filters, they wanted it taken off platforms altogether. For them, porn is not something young people should just have to deal with online. They wanted it gone.



Commercialisation

Some students focused on the amount of advertising online, saying it should be reduced or removed altogether.

“Less ads. We do not need to always be pushed consumerism.”

“Remove monetisation and make the internet for knowledge, not corporate.”

They asked why their online lives are flooded with ads and why social media seems to exist mainly to make money. For them, constant consumerism takes away from what the internet should really be about: connection, learning and creativity. They wanted fewer ads and platforms that put people first, not profit.

Q3

Features and formats

Some students wanted entire features taken out of platforms.

“I would remove the reels area of Snapchat.”

“Get rid of any form of short video content.”

They pointed to design choices like reels and short video loops as addictive and unnecessary. For them, these formats do not add value but instead take over their online time in ways that feel unhealthy. Their fix was straightforward: remove the features that do more harm than good.

16%

of responses made clear calls to **REMOVE** what makes platforms unsafe, untrustworthy or hostile.

THEMES THAT EMERGED:

Add (20 responses, 12 percent)

Although fewer students gave Add responses, their ideas were some of the most creative. They were not asking for bans. They were imagining new tools that would make social media safer, healthier and more useful.



ADD SUBTHEMES: Safety tools

Students wanted protections that stop harm before it reaches them.

“Keeping kids safe online and using AI to prevent harm.”

“Try to lock personal sites from kids like OnlyFans or Pornhub.”

“Apps that know when someone was born so they cannot lie about their age.”

They suggested blocking harmful sites altogether and using technology to prevent children from lying about their age. Their message was clear: safety should be built in, not left up to chance.



Wellbeing Tools

Some asked for tools to help them manage time online in healthier ways.

“If you spend 4 hours on TikTok it bans you for the rest of the day.”

“Be able to lock the app for a timeframe.”

“Add screen time limits so it does not affect school.”

Instead of adults cutting them off, they wanted tools they could use themselves to take breaks. These ideas were not about removing social media but about helping them balance it with school, friends and sleep.

Q3



Control and Filters

Students wanted more control over what appears in their feeds.

“You could put in keywords and only be shown content on those topics.”

“Add more filters but less beauty filters.”

They were frustrated with feeds that push irrelevant or harmful content. They also drew a line between fun, creative filters and beauty filters that make them feel less confident.



Values and Rights

A few students suggested bigger changes to how the internet should work.

“Introduce the right to be forgotten in New Zealand.”

“Promote positivity, not just negative content.”

They wanted platforms that promote positivity and the right to remove personal information if they choose.



AI Transparency

Some were already thinking ahead about how AI is used on social media.

“AI on social media must state that it is AI.”

“AI should go through investigation for ethical concerns.”

They wanted clear labelling and checks so AI cannot be used to mislead or cause harm.

12%

of responses wanted to **ADD new tools that would make social media safer, healthier and more useful**

THEMES THAT EMERGED:



Other (11 responses, 6 percent)

A small group of students gave answers that did not fit neatly into the main categories. Even so, they add important depth by showing how diverse and sometimes contradictory young people's views can be.

Some wanted stricter rules, suggesting age limits should rise to 15 or even 16, or that families should have more direct oversight.

“Not letting your kids under the age of 15 or 16 on social media.”

“Introduce Family Link for parents.”

Others were more skeptical about the need for change at all. A few argued that social media is fine as it is, or that more rules would only make things worse.

Q3

“Nothing. Social media is good as it is now. Adding age ban verification will make things worse.”

There were also students who pushed for alternatives. Some imagined a single, heavily controlled app that replaced the many platforms they currently juggle. Others suggested linking online behaviour to real-world consequences or encouraging people to step away from social media altogether.

“Instagram has one of the best privacy models, but with a lack of control over feeds and reels. Improving control would make it better.”

“I would correlate online punishments with real world consequences.”

“I would also encourage more people not to use social media like TikTok, Instagram and X.”

Other responses reminded us that not every young person fits the main patterns. Some leaned towards stricter rules, like higher age limits or more parental oversight. Others pushed the opposite way, saying nothing should change or that more rules would only make things worse. A few imagined alternatives altogether, from one tightly controlled app to linking online behaviour with real-world consequences.

These views were scattered, sometimes contradictory, and often outside the mainstream. But that is the point. Not every teenager sees social media in the same way, and not every teenager wants the same fixes. Including these outliers shows the diversity of views that are usually left out of adult debates.

6%

of responses did not fit neatly into the main categories, showing how diverse and sometimes contradictory young people's views can be.

If platforms listened, this is what they would hear

The 172 responses to this question show exactly where young people think social media is failing them and what would make the biggest difference in their lives. They did not hold back.

What they described was not small fixes but the changes they believe are needed to make these spaces safe, fair and worth their time.

Q3

Many called for structural change: safety built in as a foundation, reporting systems that actually work, feeds that do not push harmful trends, and age limits that mean something in practice. These were not tweaks. They were demands for a redesign.

Others wanted existing tools to work as promised. They said reporting is hollow without enforcement, age checks are meaningless if everyone can bypass them, and filters fail when explicit content still slips into feeds. Their frustration was not with the idea of safety systems but with the gap between what platforms claim and what young people see every day.

Some went further, naming the features and behaviours that should be removed completely: porn bots, scammers, bullying, endless ads and addictive short-form video. They saw no reason to accept these as the cost of being online.

At the same time, students offered new ideas. They imagined practical tools to manage screen time, lock out harmful sites, shape their own feeds, and bring transparency to AI.

Their proposals showed creativity, pragmatism and a belief that social media could be made better if young people were given real control.

A small group gave responses that did not fit the main patterns. Some wanted higher age limits or stronger parental oversight, while others argued for no change at all or alternatives outside the current system.

This data brings together perspectives from across New Zealand and, importantly, from 13-15 year olds who are often missing from public debate. Their insights are not the final word, but they are a critical first step toward understanding how social media actually works in their lives.

If these voices are ignored, regulation will keep circling around the wrong problems while the real ones go unchecked.

If they are taken seriously, they offer a roadmap for solutions grounded in reality rather than assumption.

Q4

THE DATA

Question Four: A message to people in charge

The question asked: “*What message do you have for the people in charge, including adults, decision makers and platform creators?*”

A total of 128 students responded. What they shared was about more than apps or features. They spoke about trust, fairness, responsibility and being heard. Some focused on what should change within social media, but many went further, challenging the way adults make decisions that shape young people’s lives.

Their responses split into six main themes:

- **36 students (28 percent)** called for youth to be included in decisions
- **29 students (23 percent)** rejected bans and wanted problems fixed instead
- **22 students (17 percent)** highlighted the positives of social media
- **18 students (14 percent)** asked adults to recognise teenagers are not all the same
- **15 students (12 percent)** said platforms and adults carry responsibility, not just young people
- **8 students (6 percent)** urged adults to accept the realities of growing up today

THEME 1:

Youth must be included in decisions (36 responses, 28 percent)

The strongest message was about power. More than a quarter of students said they are tired of adults making decisions about their lives without them. They see the consequences of this exclusion in rules that do not fit, in proposals to restrict access that they believe will not work, and in debates that misrepresent what it is actually like to grow up online.

“Youth are not just the future. We are the now. Youth need to be more involved especially in decisions that involve us.”

“Consult us. We are the experts.”

“If you are going to make decisions about younger people, have young people help make the decisions.”

“Stop trying to force every child to listen to you if you will not give them a chance to talk to you.”

“To those people making my decisions for me... I am a person. Your decision will affect my life.”

Q4

These words reveal a deep mistrust of adult-led processes that leave young people voiceless.

28%

of responses said **YOUTH MUST BE INCLUDED IN DECISIONS**

Students were not asking for token gestures but for genuine participation. They warned that without their involvement; policies will continue to miss the reality of their lives and reinforce the very divide they are asking adults to close.

THEME 2: **Do not ban, fix what is broken** (29 responses, 23 percent)

Almost a quarter of students spoke directly against bans. They said blunt restrictions would cut off the positives of social media without stopping the negatives. Banning apps or raising age limits might sound strong to adults, but to teenagers it looks pointless and easy to avoid.

“Adding age limits and banning apps will not stop people.”

“Banning something does not mean it is inaccessible. VPNs exist. We will bypass your limits.”

“Please do not ban it. Please.”

“Understand that yes social media can be harmful, but teens nowadays barely have any places to go. When you end up banning it, what happens next?”

Their frustration was not with the idea of making things safer but with the way adults choose to go about it. They argued that bans miss the point. The risks come from broken systems inside the platforms themselves: unsafe algorithms, scams, bullying and harmful content that is far too easy to access. Students pointed out that these harms do not vanish if access is restricted. They are built into the way platforms work and will remain until those systems are redesigned.

What they asked for instead is action on the problems that actually affect them every day.

23%

of responses spoke directly **AGAINST BANS**

They want the unsafe parts of platforms to be fixed, not hidden behind restrictions that may or may not work and that risk creating bigger problems in the process.

Q4

THEME 3: **Social media has positives too** **(22 responses, 17 percent)**

A strong group of students spoke up about the positives that are usually left out of the conversation. They talked about how social media helps them stay connected, manage challenges in their lives and even contribute to wider causes.

“For some youth, social media is their only way for communication for friends, opportunities and counselling.”

“My online life has more of a positive impact on my mental health since it allows me to connect with others and lets me know I am not alone.”

“A small community and I raised over 5000 USD for food and medical aid in Gaza that would not have been possible without social media.”

“It is a way to feel seen. You get to show who you are, which is why hate hurts so much more.”

These students were clear that social media is not just a source of harm.

For many it is a lifeline, a space to build friendships, a tool to make change, and a way to share who they are. They asked adults to stop treating it only as a danger and to start recognising the good that it makes possible.

17%

of responses talked about how **SOCIAL MEDIA HAS POSITIVES TOO**

Ignoring this side of their experience risks taking away the very things that help them feel connected, capable and supported.

THEME 4: **Respect our diversity** **(18 responses, 14 percent)**

Another strong theme was a demand for adults to stop treating teenagers as if they are all the same. Students described the wide variety in how they use social media, rejecting stereotypes and assumptions that paint them as a single group.

“Not every kid is the same. We all are different and we all have our own perspectives.”

“Most kids are responsible online. You are just targeting the kids who are not.”

“Not everyone online watches pornography and explicit images.”

“All teenagers like different things online. Just because a group of teenagers like a particular thing does not mean we all do.”

Q4

This is a warning that blanket rules based on averages or extreme examples will always miss the mark.

14%

of responses demanded adults start **RESPECTING** teenage **DIVERSITY**

Policies that assume all teens behave the same risk undermining those who already use social media in safe and positive ways.

“Pay more attention to apps and sites, especially comment sections. It can be very bad.”

This was a direct pushback against the idea that young people themselves are the main issue. Students were clear that they do not control how platforms are designed or moderated. If platforms are unsafe, then the responsibility lies with the adults who built and regulate them.

12%

of responses said to **FIX PLATFORMS NOT YOUNG PEOPLE**

They want adults to stop blaming teenagers for problems that come from the way platforms are built and the choices made by those running them.

THEME 5: **Fix platforms, not young people (15 responses, 12 percent)**

Some students said the real problem is not them, but the systems adults have created. They argued that platforms, politicians and companies carry responsibility for what happens online, not just the teenagers using the tools.

“Make sure people are kind online. Use your power to make sure people are safe while online.”

“Political parties campaigning on Instagram and TikTok are creating ruder content than most teenagers today. It is a double standard.”

THEME 6: **Recognise the world we live in (8 responses, 6 percent)**

A smaller group spoke about the gap between how adults remember growing up and what it is like for teenagers today. They asked adults to stop comparing online life to a world that no longer exists and to see the internet as part of their everyday environment.

Q4

“Times have changed. We are not living in the same world as you did in the 1950s to 1990s.”

“We were thrown into the world of the internet and it is a part of our life. Separating us from it is like removing a turtle’s shell.”

“It is not as brain rotting as you think. A lot of us are smart with what we do online.”

These students were not saying that everything online is good. They were saying that it is inseparable from how they live and grow up. Adults cannot expect teenagers to live as if the internet is optional or temporary.

6%

of responses asked adults to **RECOGNISE** what life is like for teenagers today

They want decisions to be made with the reality of their world in mind, not based on nostalgia for a time that has passed.

Messages Adults Cannot Ignore

Students used this final question to speak directly to adults. They asked to be part of decisions, to see broken systems fixed instead of blunt restrictions, and to have the positives of social media recognised as well as the risks. They pushed back against being treated as one group or as a problem. They said responsibility sits with platforms and politicians, and they want adults to face the reality of their lives today, not the world adults grew up in.

These insights should not sit in the background of the debate.

Young people need more opportunities to bring their voices into the centre, so that the decisions made about them are shaped with them. Without this, the same problems will continue, and the chance to build something better will be lost.

FINAL WORD

A Future Built With, Not For, Young People

This roadshow made one thing clear: there is no single teen experience online. From 176 students across 19 schools, we heard stories of connection, creativity, harm, safety, learning and identity. These voices challenge the simple assumptions adults often rely on and replace them with a more complex and truthful picture.

What came through most strongly was a call to be included. Young people asked for broken systems to be fixed, not for blunt restrictions that are unlikely to work as intended.

They asked for the positives of social media to be recognised alongside the risks. They asked to be treated as individuals, not stereotypes. And they reminded us that responsibility lies with the adults who build, regulate and profit from these platforms.

Decisions about young people's online lives have been made without them for too long. This report shows what is lost when their perspectives are excluded, and what can be gained when their voices are at the centre.

If acted on, these insights could guide safer and fairer platforms and policies. If ignored, the same problems will continue, and young people will once again be left to carry them alone.