Digital Future Society

Gen Z and digital inclusion: moving beyond *digital natives* to address digital access among youth

A programme of

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Digital Future Society is a non-profit transnational initiative that engages policymakers, civic society organisations, academic experts and entrepreneurs from around the world to explore, experiment and explain how technologies can be designed, used and governed in ways that create the conditions for a more inclusive and equitable society.

Our aim is to help policymakers identify, understand and prioritise key challenges and opportunities now and in the next ten years in the areas of public innovation, digital trust and equitable growth.

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Digital Future Society

Introduction

Digital technologies have evolved rapidly over the past 50 years with researchers only just starting to see the impact they are having on different generations. Some experts believe the pervasive use of technology impacts youth in profound ways. For example, the term *digital native*, coined by educator and researcher, Marc Prensky, describes how younger generations — at the time Millennials — "think and process information fundamentally differently from their predecessors" referring to how they are "native speakers" of the digital language of the Internet (Prensky, 2001). Although it is a concept that has since been dismantled, being based on limited empirical evidence, the phrase digital natives still circulates and has influenced policymakers and other stakeholders in their approach to youth, technology and education (Eynon, 2020).

The concept of digital natives is still recurring today, especially when talking about today's youth, also known as Generation Z or Gen Z. However, the challenges young people faced during the pandemic-induced confinement shed light on the online reality youth face and the associated challenges around obtaining meaningful access and skills. This means beyond digital natives; some experts have also begun to use the term *digital orphans* to describe the current situation young people face today as online users. The term digital orphan refers to youth who have grown up with access to digital technologies but with very little guidance (Samuel, 2017).

Digital inclusion initiatives aimed at youth, therefore, must look deeper than the generational cohort they belong to. While some literature does portray today's youth and Gen Z as digital natives, researchers advise taking a careful approach when analysing generational cohorts. Often, generational labels can oversimplify differences. For example, popular perceptions of generations tend to describe the experiences of the upper middle class (Dimock, 2023). In the case of how young people use technology, public opinion leans towards depictions of youth with the latest digital devices and habits. As digital divide researchers have shown though, digital inclusion is highly dependent on other socioeconomic factors such as income, level of education, and geographic location. Regardless of generational cohort, those who have the economic and social capital offline, are more likely to reap the benefits of being online regardless of age.

While half of the world's population is online and 75% of people aged between 15 and 24 are internet users, huge discrepancies exist among them (ITU, 2022). Yes, throughout the early 2000s, Gen Z grew up in a world where global internet adoption increased rapidly, from 16% in 2005 to 67% in 2023 (ITU, n.d.) and the digital divide is shrinking between developed and developing countries. Yet, there is a significant difference between those who live in high-income countries (93%) to those who live in lower-middle-income countries (55%) or even low-income countries (27%) (ITU, n.d.). People in the least developed countries spend less time online and evidence also shows that countries with low connectivity will have a wide gender gap (ITU, n.d.).

According to the UN's World Youth Report 2020, young people between the age of 15-24 make up 15.5% of the global population (United Nations, 2020). The report also shows that the youth population in the least developed countries is growing 2.5 times faster than the broader growth measured across the total population of the world (Ibid.). Given these statistics, ensuring sustainable, green and digital transitions, is even more crucial for youth in developing countries. A lack of meaningful access to digital technologies can set developing economies back and further engrain existing inequalities.

Digitalisation has historically acted as a multiplier, amplifying both the opportunities and challenges societies face today. For example, it has lowered barriers to accessing information, but on the other hand, has accelerated the spread of disinformation. Gen Z faces the challenge of navigating these challenges in an increasingly hybrid context as they transition into adulthood. Accordingly, this generation will impact the way the digital landscape evolves in the future while being shaped by their online experiences today.

As digital technologies advance, policymakers, educators, tech companies, civil society, parents and youth struggle to ensure that digital access and skills will benefit today's youth rather than hinder their development. This task is even more urgent in developing countries and marginalised communities, given the challenges related to securing meaningful digital access. Moreover, some experts are concerned that growing up in a digital space where data surveillance and commodification of data are the norm has created a value shift in Gen Z. For example, lacking awareness of the importance of their digital rights, such as data privacy, might undermine policies in place (Portulans Institute, 2023).

It is also important to note the gaps in the literature regarding digital inclusion in youth in the Global South and that many of the studies and articles mentioned in this whitepaper focus on Western democracies. Moreover, a global perspective highlights the need to consider youth as a heterogeneous group, intersected by other categories — such as gender, sexuality, disability, ethnicity, religion, etc.

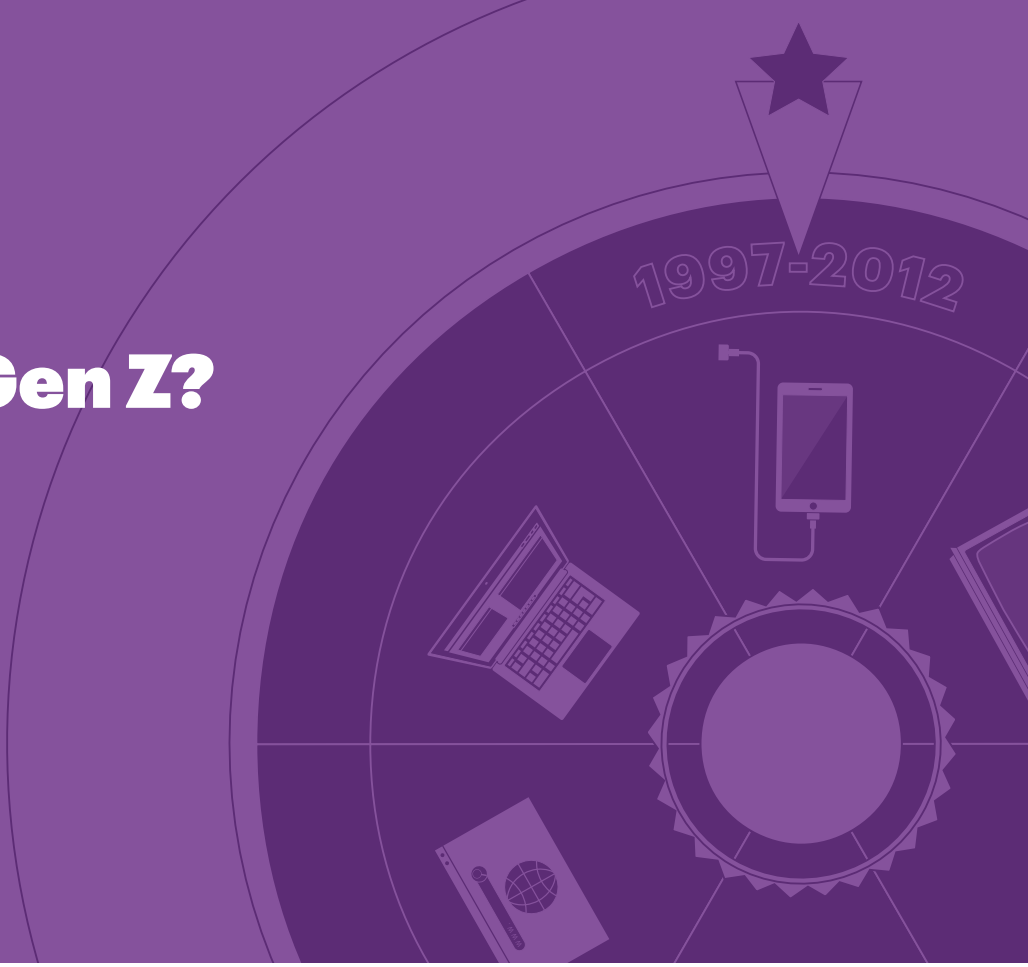
This whitepaper juxtaposes portrayals of Gen Z from the media, research publications from consulting services and official statistics and surveys from institutions and academia. There are many gaps in research and understanding of this generation meaning the whitepaper seeks to create a space for reflection rather than offering answers. Reflections on how the digital inclusion of youth is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, which needs evidence-based studies and direct consultation with youth to fully understand how this generation faces challenges to reap the benefits of being online.

Digital Future Society and the digital divide(s)

In many contexts and official statistics, the term digital divide refers to the disparity in accessing ICT. Therefore, bridging the digital divide involves increasing access to the internet, infrastructure and devices, and skills. Measuring the digital divide in a global context is challenging as there are different levels of the divide, and often measurements only provide a general overview of individuals who are connected vs those who are unconnected. However, the Digital Future Society think tank promotes a broader concept of the digital divide, as there is no single divide and there are determinants that contribute to digital inequalities — they go beyond physical access and infrastructure and have evolved to include skills, digital rights and digital agency. The think tank promotes the understanding of digital access as a continuum that includes infrastructure, devices, skills, usage, socioeconomic determinants, and protection from harms and rights violations in the digital space. To promote meaningful digital access, policymakers need to adopt holistic multidimensional approaches.[1]

[1] For more information, see our report: Beyond digital access as a human right in cities: proposing an integrated, multi-dimensional approach, available at: https://digitalfuturesociety.com/report/beyond-digital-access-as-a-human-right-in-cities/

01 Who are Gen Z?



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Gen Z are currently the largest generation composing about a third of the global population (Fry, 2020). This cohort comprises the majority of the population in Africa, making it the youngest continent of the world (Wangari, 2018). Estimates also say Gen Z will account for a quarter of the population in the Asia-Pacific region by 2025 (Kim et al. 2020). The EU and North American populations are slightly older due to slowing birth rates. However, with, for example, immigration in the US expected to make Millennials the largest generation over Baby Boomers these demographics may change (Fry, 2020). The Gen Z populations in both Europe and the US are the most diverse with Gen Z in the EU more likely than older generations to be foreign-born and seemingly better educated (Fry, 2020; Milotay, 2020).

Given the significant difference in connectivity between high-income and low-income countries, digital policies must be mindful of the challenges we face in ensuring equitable growth. Overall, there is great concern over the social mobility of younger generations, as there has been a general trend since the 90s of "sticky floors and sticky ceilings", which describes the lack of mobility between those at the top and bottom of the social ladder (Milotay, 2020).

Furthermore, at the time of writing this whitepaper, the individuals belonging to this cohort, born between 1997–2012 are now between the ages of 12 and 27. Not only have they experienced mass adoption of digital technologies which have influenced elections and played a role in the spread of misinformation, they have also, in their formative years, gone through two economic recessions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and seen a rise of populism.

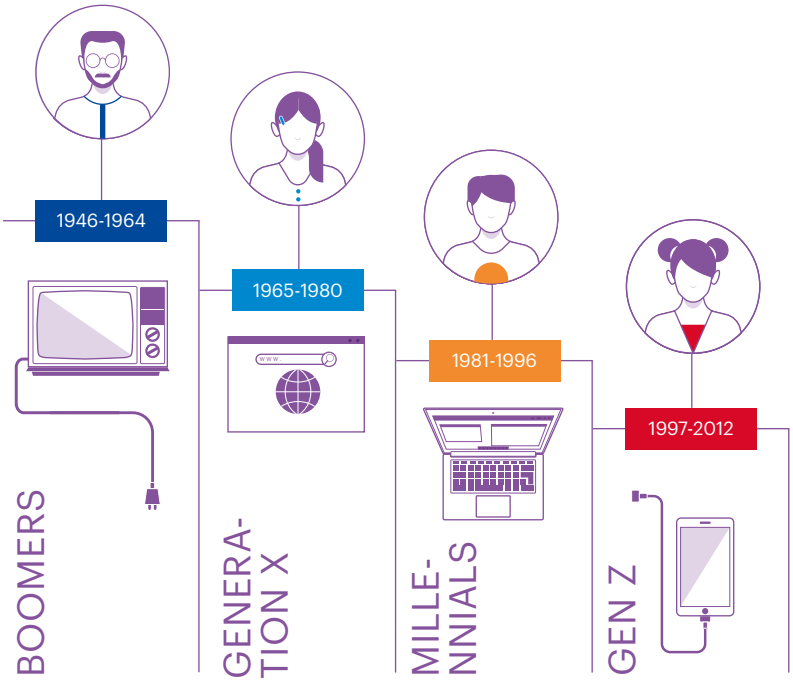
What do they say about Gen Z?

There is a wide variety of content and research available on generational differences, beliefs, attitudes and the challenges they face. Consultancy organisations have long published reports comparing generational attitudes and habits from a commercial perspective — how to model businesses, what do generations value as customers, what can we expect from them as employees, etc. (EY Centroamérica, 2023).

The media and press have portrayed Gen Z as neurotic, value driven, and independent thinkers — ready to question the status quo (Caluori, 2024; De Witte, 2024). Many experts seek to answer whether societies today are living through a change in paradigm, given that a new generation has been born and raised in an increasingly hybrid world (Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2023). However, as the Pew Research Center has found, there is still no clear understanding relating to the implications of growing up in a technological environment. As leaders in generational studies, the Center cautions against the use of these labels — often used as clickbait content — and suggests taking a cautious and data-driven approach to generational analysis (Parker, 2023). Given that Gen Z are today's youth, societal beliefs about age could alter perceptions of analysis, which calls to question: are these changes profoundly shaping a generation, or will they fade overtime?

Growing up in a digital world

Digitalisation has evolved so rapidly and in such profound ways that generations are often portrayed as worlds apart. The same rings true for the generational differences in technology, older generations are stereotypically unskilled while younger generations, especially Gen Z are often referred to as digital natives.



Boomers, for example, lived through the expansion of television. While Generation X, those born between 1965–1980, were witness to the first personal computers. Millennials, 1981–1996, were adolescents during the dot-com bubble in the 90s. For Gen Z, 1997–2012, floppy disks and dial-up internet access were on the way out as the iPhone launched in 2007 and social media platforms were on the rise.

Not all generational differences can be attributed to digitalisation with the impact these technological milestones have had on the wider population also depending on the broader geographical and socioeconomic context. This is because digital divides, the inequalities in access to and use of digital technologies, go beyond generational cohorts being a result of a wide array of factors (geographic location, language, level of studies, economic status).

There can be disparities between one generation just as across generations — generations are diverse and complex groups. However, while adoption and use of digital devices do not happen uniformly across the globe, a generational perspective when contextualised and approached carefully can provide researchers, social scientists and policymakers with information on shifts in behaviours, attitudes and lifestyle.

Today's youth is Gen Z, shapers of our digital future

The UN defines youth as those who are between the age of 15–24 and the OECD expands their definition of youth to include those aged 15–29. While many countries draw the line of youth at the age of 18, when they legally become an adult, there are different policies globally. For example, the European Union defines young people as those between 15–29 years old.

Youth is a fluid definition that changes depending on culture and context. However, societies have certain preconceptions and biases directed towards people based on their age, also termed ageism, and this could have a significant impact on the opportunities and wellbeing of the age group. Young people are often not included in decision-making spaces and if they are, they may not be included meaningfully (World Health Organization, 2021).

Although there is little research on the impact ageism has on younger populations, there is evidence that negative attitudes and prejudices occur in the workplace as well as the legal and political systems. Moreover, it is worth considering how ageism or its effects can spill into digital spaces and their governance (World Health Organization, 2021).

As more people move online globally, opportunities and risks grow. Issues concerning online security and privacy, along with an abundance of harmful content have contributed to a general decline of trust on the Internet. The past decade has seen legislators especially concerned about the decline of trust online. The EU's Digital Service Act, the UK's Online Safety Bill and the US' Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) are all examples of recent regulation that seeks to promote a safe online environment.

This presents an important opportunity to consult and empower youth voices in order to better understand their needs and concerns and co-create digital spaces to be safe and beneficial for this latest generation as well as for those to come.

Two examples of youth empowering initiatives to address digital rights:

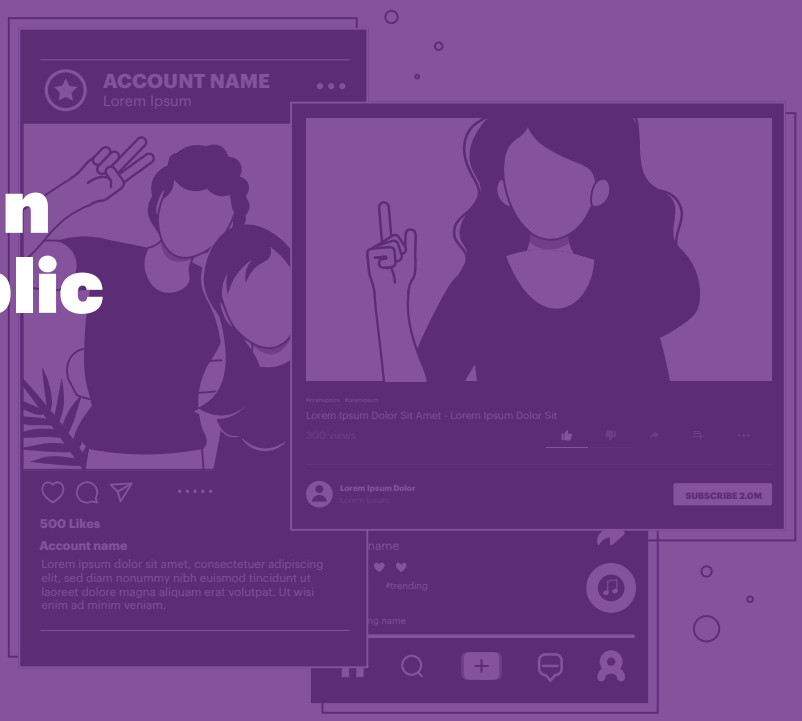
2023 Youth Assembly for Digital Rights, Canada

In June 2023, 35 Canadian youth gathered to discuss digital rights and online safety. It was among the first youth assemblies to address this topic and the results helped to feed the recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly on Democratic Expression. Participating youth identified important issues that they would like policymakers to address, including equitable access to technology and internet, safe digital spaces, control over data and how it is used, and accessible resources on digital literacy (Canadian Youth Assembly on Digital Rights and Safety, 2023).

Digital Rights Manifesto for Children and Adolescents, Catalonia

Between 2021–2022, the Government of Catalonia (autonomous community of Spain), initiated a consultation project to understand perspectives and concerns of minors aged 7–17 relating to their use of digital technologies. The project included the participation of 750 students and resulted in a report on how to improve policy and educational systems to meet the needs of children and youth so they can flourish in online spaces. In 2024, 162 of the participants organised and presented the manifesto of digital rights for the children and adolescents of Catalonia. This manifesto, gives voice to youth, who highlight the need to educate in ways to safely navigate online environments autonomously and prepare them for the associated risks (Fundació Ferrer i Guàrdia, 2024).

02 Participation in the digital public space



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Over time the Internet has become a space and tool for civic engagement. Platforms have evolved into digital public spaces where people can exercise their voice and act as a force for mobilisation. Youth has often been associated with activism throughout history, however, Gen Z stands out for the way they harness technology to communicate and garner support for a cause (Carnegie, 2022). While youth involvement in institutional politics is on the decline, young people, now more than ever, favour informal acts of participation — and for many, it is their preferred type of engagement. For others, activism is increasingly hybrid, with digital technologies used to support face-to-face interactions (Lombana-Bermudez et al. 2020; Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2023). Some argue that a new type of citizen is emerging under the phenomenon of networked individualism, which sees citizens as individualist, cause-oriented and not necessarily committed over the long term (Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, 2023).

The media often portrays Gen Z as being socially progressive and engaged in social and political causes (Carnegie, 2022). Surveys also show that youth today show diminished faith in democratic politics and exhibit a lack of trust in political processes and institutions (Gramlich, 2019; PRRI, 2024). They are also perceived to be more liberal than previous generations. This sparks several questions on how digital technologies are shaping this generational cohort's attitudes and beliefs. Since youth use social media platforms more frequently than other generations, media researchers are particularly interested in the effect social media has on political participation. Some scholars are critical of social media's role in enhancing political engagement among youth. Other concerns regard the impact of social media algorithms and the prevalence of online echo chambers, and the role they play in increasing the polarisation evident today.

Youth political activism, a hybrid practice

The roles that both youth and digital technologies have played in sweeping social movements, such as the Arab Spring, Fridays for Future, and Black Lives Matter may have a profound impact on how this generation participates politically. Surveys show there is a strong affinity for young people and online activism. According to the Pew Research Center — 45% of Gen Z adults have interacted with content on climate change, while older generations are less engaged, Gen X (27%) and Baby Boomer (21%) (Thigpen and Tyson, 2021). In Europe, young people aged 16–29 were on average more likely to express their opinion or take part in voting to define civic or political issues via the internet than older adults (Eurostat, 2024).

Digital technologies have lowered the barriers to civic participation. More than older generations, young people prefer informing themselves about political issues and communicate about the issues that most concern them through social media than via other channels (Eurostat, 2024). According to the Eurobarometer on Youth and Democracy 2022, a majority of young people (58%) are active in their communities and participate in youth organisations. It shows that 30% of respondents (young people) believe engaging in social media by expressing their opinion, using hashtags, visualising a cause on their profile, etc. to be an effective action to be heard by decision-makers. This answer came second to voting in local, national or European elections (European Commission, 2024).

However, there is limited research exploring the reasons behind young people voicing their political views online. As youth online and offline participation becomes more blurred some might feel pressured to participate or not participate for fear of being excluded. A study conducted by CIRCLE (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement) and Tufts University, showed that 40% of the teens surveyed felt unqualified to voice their opinions about social and political issues online, and that 39% did not do so for fear of how their social circle might react (McGee et al. 2021). Others critique online political participation as *slacktivism* — a superficial, ineffective form of activism because the stakes are low. Contrary to these critiques, it has been shown that there is a strong correlation between online and offline civic participation, and that youth are more likely to engage in both environments (Boulianne and Theocharis, 2018).

However, as their activity is prevalently online, youth activists are especially exposed to security and privacy risks (this will be discussed further in the following section on safety and security). Youths face slander, cyberbullying and defamation. Young female activists are especially vulnerable to doxxing and other forms of online sexual violence. In some countries, activists face online surveillance and face serious repercussions if they do not know how to protect their online security. According to a recent report by the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders — youth activists are especially vulnerable considering that those who are between 18 and 32 years old are not protected under the Convention of the Rights of the Child while still facing specific challenges due to their age (Lawlor, 2024).

Youth-led digital activism: Politics4Her[2] and Encode justice[3]

Politics4Her is an intersectional feminist digital platform that promotes the participation of young women in political and decision-making processes. This online platform raises awareness on issues from the Global Majority and uses online networks as tools for advocacy, mobilisation and peacebuilding. Its founder, Yasmina Benslimane, perceives social media as fundamental to addressing gender equality. There are several barriers young women face globally to meaningfully access the Internet, such as disinformation, hate speech, threats, etc. Politics4her relies on social media to give young women a voice and tools for social change (Benslimane, 2022). The community insists that online participation and engagement is key for driving their efforts. For example, Benslimane states that the internet is often the only source of information young women in Morocco can access to learn about topics related to sexual education and women's empowerment (Chebbab, 2022). The organisation recently rallied support and funding for women during the 2023 earthquake in Morocco. Online channels have proven to be essential for highlighting the gender sensitive issues often overlooked in crisis situations (Zouiten, 2023).

Encode justice is a community of over 1,000 high school and college students from over 40 US states and 30 countries with a mission to advocate for safe and equitable artificial intelligence (AI). The community advocates this on the basis that youth have a unique stake in AI's immediate and long term impacts. Encode justice advocates for young people as critical stakeholders in conversations about AI. Its work is twofold, seeking to raise awareness and educate youth through AI literacy workshops while also lobbying on AI policy issues at different levels of government. Its founder and president, Sneha Revanur, recently took part in a meeting with US Vice President Harris and other civil society organisations to discuss the risks related to AI (Encode Justice, 2023).

Political polarisation and social media

Given the frequent use of social media as a main news source by youth today, there is concern relating to the influence platforms may have on shaping opinions on political and social issues. One of the potential impacts that digital technologies have on political participation is the increase in polarisation. Coupled with the waning trust in democracy among young people around the world, the effects of polarisation may be harmful over time (Open Society Foundations, 2023).

[2] See: https://www.politics4her.com/

[3] See: https://encodejustice.org/

On the one hand, researchers argue that platform polarisation effects may increase political participation while on the other, they caution against the polarisation fuelling extremist ideologies and movements (Barrett et al. 2021; Smith et al. 2024). The latter argue that social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok increase polarisation through their recommendation algorithms — creating echo chambers — in which users are exposed to personalised and curated news and information, reinforcing their own views.

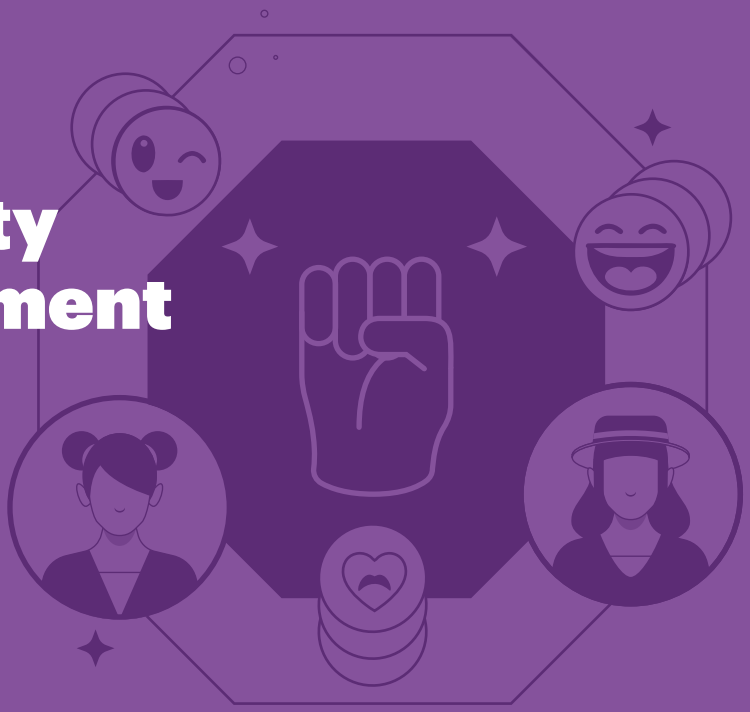
However, research on the impact social media platforms have on polarisation in general is not conclusive. Some research questions the role new media actually has on polarisation as Americans over the age of 65 are increasingly more polarised (The Nielsen Total Audience Report, 2018), while youth appear to be more liberal and may be key in decreasing polarisation in the US (Friedman and Schultz, 2024). Recent publications highlight how far we are from understanding the relationship between the two. For example, one systematic review, recommends further studies be conducted outside the US, as most studies rely on American samples. It also calls for researchers to be consistent in their definition of political polarisation and apply more standardised measurements to their studies (Kubin and von Sikorski, 2021).

Things to consider:

Digital technologies provide opportunities for new formats of civic and political participation for youth. Engaging formats and technological innovations can lower barriers for marginalised voices and increase participation. Youth who live with limited access to information do have the opportunity, with meaningful digital access, to exercise their right to information. However, there are risks and challenges associated with creating an inclusive and safe space for online participation. Without adequate measures to protect youth online, they may be more vulnerable to surveillance, harassment and repression, could lose trust and confidence, and digital divides may widen.

The future of activism will likely become more hybrid, and perhaps protests will also be virtual. Digital activism has the potential to mobilise and foster democracy, as it proves to be an important outlet of resistance against totalitarian governments (Teixeira, 2024). However, to fully understand the impact and implications of using digital technologies for civic participation, especially for younger generations, further research must be done in other countries, optimally using standard ways of measuring to ensure objective comparability and with the cooperation of social media platforms.

03 Safety, security and empowerment



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With the rise of mobile devices and social media platforms, online safety has become a huge concern globally, especially in recent years. Harmful online content is growing at a rapid pace and is increasingly pervasive. The year 2023 marked an important year for online safety, while significant milestones in regulation occurred with the EU's Digital Services Act and UK's Online Safety Act. In January 2024, the US court held hearings questioning tech executives on their child safety measures on social media platforms.

When it comes to online safety and cybersecurity, there are conflicting portrayals on whether Gen Z is wary of the risks associated with being online. Some sources depict Gen Z as knowledgeable in internet safety measures, such as clearing cookies, etc. while other studies show young people as vulnerable and even representing potential threats to cybersecurity measures as they do not actually implement many best practices, leaving them open to scams and having their accounts hacked (Ohlelheiser, 2023). Others characterise this generation as less concerned about personal data and privacy on social media, choosing convenience over data privacy (DeBrusk and Kreacic, 2023).

There is speculation regarding the underlying causes. Some theories suggest youth use technology more often and others claim they prioritise other issues over privacy. One McKinsey report found that Gen Z is more likely to take risks online than previous generations (McKinsey Digital, 2022). A Deloitte survey showed that six out of ten young Americans found that the benefits from online services outweigh their privacy concerns, compared to four out of ten older generations (Deloitte Center for Technology, Media and Telecommunications, 2023).

Recent concerns regarding online safety and harms, have propelled the debate in creating online spaces and digital policies that are receptive to youth and their needs. Youth participation has been gaining relevance in national and transnational initiatives related to global issues — especially tech policy. In 2023, Spain established a *Consejo Asesor Digital Joven* (Youth Advisory Board on Digital Issues) to address the lack of youth perspectives in existing tech policy and the Youth Advisory Council at the ITU appointed an inaugural Youth Advisory Board in 2024 to promote representation of young voices in the UN Digital Agency.

Categorising online harms

One of the major challenges in addressing online safety is that there is no agreed term on what online or digital safety means. Definitions of terms and categories of online harms also vary — making it difficult to compare statistics and findings (Council of Europe, 2024). The World Economic Forum (WEF) has developed a typology of harms to facilitate a common terminology to use to discuss online harms:

Type	Specific Harm
Threats to personal and community safety	Child sexual abuse material, child sexual exploitation material, pro-terror material, content that encourages participation in violent extremist organisations, violent graphic content, content that promotes violence, content that promotes dangerous physical behaviour grooming, recruitment and radicalisation, technology-facilitated abuse, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, child sexual exploitation and abuse
Harm to health and well-being	Material that promotes suicide, self-harm and disordered eating, developmentally inappropriate content
Hate and discrimination	Hate speech, algorithmic discrimination
Violation of dignity	Online bullying and harassment, sexual extortion
Invasion of privacy	Doxxing, image-based abuse
Deception and manipulation	Disinformation and misinformation, deceptive synthetic media, impersonation, scams, phishing, catfishing

Youth are more exposed to online bullying and harassment

According to the Pew Research survey on Online Harassment 2022, about four in ten Americans have experienced online harassment. For younger adults (those aged between 18–29) 64% of the age group have been the target of online harassment with the figure dropping for older groups — to 49% for those aged 30–49 and 30% for those aged 50–64. The younger cohort of the study also reported more severe forms of online abuse, with almost half reporting severe behaviours including being physically threatened, stalked, sexually harassed or harassed for a sustained period of time (Vogels, 2021).

According to Microsoft's Global Online Safety Survey (2024), those between the ages of 18–24 face the most risk exposure, peaking at the ages of 18 and 19. The same survey, compares the worries of teens and parents — while teens worry more about threats of violence and hate speech parents are more worried about sexual exploitation, abuse and sexual solicitation.

There is a lot of debate surrounding what type of measures should be put in place to reduce the negative impact of online harms. One of the main concerns regarding regulation is the potential infringement of youth rights. Those who critique the United States' Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA) have highlighted how in seeking to protect children, the bill could negatively impact freedom of expression and access to information. The LGBTQI+ community is specifically concerned with how this regulation could censor youth (Kelley, 2023).

There is little research on how online safety affects those transitioning into legal age with most of the data collected and measures taken focusing on online safety between minors. Given that underage youth are legally dependant, it is the time when their online usage can most easily be controlled and monitored. This has been a highly contentious topic regarding the digital rights of children, especially for legislation that seeks to ban specific uses (Kelley, 2023). Canada's youth assembly report, for example, recommends that platforms should give users a simple option to opt out of algorithmic content. Also, Catalan youth have expressed the need to design age-appropriate spaces and in parallel empower young users to manage online risks promoting autonomous use of online platforms and tools (Canadian Youth Assembly on Digital Rights and Safety, 2023; Fundació Ferrer i Guàrdia, 2024).

Online harms are a growing problem and are having a significant impact on an increasing number of individuals in many regions of the world, and in particular on women and children. According to one study conducted with the participation of 14,000 girls and young women across 31 countries, 58% of participants have experienced some form of online harassment (The State of the World's Girls, 2020).

Disinformation and misinformation

One of the biggest concerns regarding youth use of the internet is their exposure to disinformation and misinformation. The widespread use of digital technologies and the growth of online platforms could make a lasting impression on how younger generations access news content, even as they grow older, potentially impacting trust long term. According to Reuters, there is a profound disconnect between traditional media outlets and those under 35, in which traditional outlets would have to change their format and tone to seem relevant and accessible (Galan et al. 2019).

With online sources being youth's preferred medium to access information, including a special preference to social media, they are especially vulnerable to disinformation and misinformation. Although false information is present in non-digital formats, digitalisation has made false information much easier to access and share.

When it comes to media literacy, younger generations are faced with a novel challenge not faced by older generations in their youth (as youth use internet as their main source of information, the implications of encountering false information may be a lot more relevant). A 2022 study carried out by Oxford Internet Institute, found that on a global scale, younger people (defined as 15–29) were most concerned about encountering disinformation on the internet (Knuutila et al. 2022). Regardless, the digital ecosystem presents new obstacles for detecting false content that prove challenging for all ages (Radicalisation Awareness Network, n.d.). The lack of transparency on online platforms, recommendation algorithms and sophisticated forms of falsifying information all contribute to the complexity behind detection.

Studies exploring the confidence youth demonstrate in identifying false information online varies. According to a survey of 18–24-year-old Canadians by the Canada Foundation for Innovation, 84% of participants were unsure whether they could trust their own judgement in discerning false from true content (Canada Foundation for Innovation, 2021). However, according to a study carried out by Poynter, younger generations (Gen Z, Millennials and Gen X) feel slightly more confident than older generations in identifying disinformation. The same survey shows that Gen Z and Millennials exhibit more advanced techniques in verifying information than older generations (Poynter Institute for Media Studies, 2022). However, another study found that American teenagers aged 13–17 are more susceptible to online conspiracies than their adult counterparts (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2023).

Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous section, platform algorithms create echo chambers, which, coupled with disinformation or misinformation, can exacerbate and further entrench the impact of illegitimate content. According to the Eurobarometer on Democracy, respondents identified disinformation or misinformation as the most serious threat to democracy. Both young and old survey respondents agree that social networks are the place where people are most likely to encounter false information, followed by more traditional media, such as television and online newspapers (European Commission, 2023).

While experts recommend that fact-checking be an effective way to counter online disinformation, research shows that it does not necessarily result in behavioural changes such as changing support for a politician (Bateman and Jackson, 2024). However, according to the latest statistics in Europe, 36% of young people engaged in fact-checking activities and are on average 10% more likely than the adult population to fact-check information found online (Eurostat, 2024).

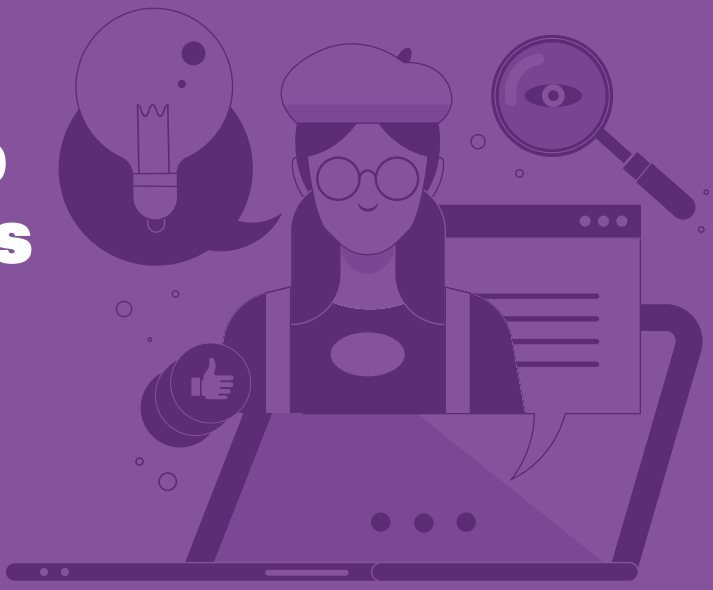
Things to consider

As youth are increasingly online, they are more exposed to the associated risks and potentially harmful impacts. It is unclear whether Gen Z is more or less skilled in detecting or dealing with online harms than older generations. Therefore, further studies are needed to understand how online harms play out in different contexts around the world.

While there is important legislation being passed to promote safety and trust online, these challenges need to be addressed from many angles. Technological solutions may diminish harmful outcomes by reducing exposure and therefore improve online experiences, however, many uncertainties remain relating to how algorithmic changes will play out.

Disinformation, for example, is a complex phenomenon and studies show the reason people believe false information lies beyond the realism of the content, and on psychosocial factors such as group identification, perceived authority, viewer's emotions, etc. Media literacy programmes, focused on empowering youth to manage online harms have been shown to be effective but difficult to scale at the speed and context necessary to reach large numbers of people (Bateman and Jackson, 2024).

04 Skills and job opportunities



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According to the WEF, Gen Z will account for 27% of the workforce in OECD countries by 2025. When it comes to the media, this generation is often touted as digital natives making them attractive assets for companies to hire. Forbes magazine describes them as well-versed in various technologies including artificial intelligence, software and social media (Chandna, 2024). While a Deloitte report from 2017 characterises the generation as having high levels of technology-related skills while apprehensive about their communication skills (Atack et al. 2017).

The digital economy has given rise to new employment opportunities and is slowly changing the way younger generations view work-life balance. Gen Z are often seen as entrepreneurial, creative, and open to change. Digital platforms and social media, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has set off a new trend of *side hustles* with individuals more engaged in alternative ways of generating income. Surveys from consulting firms also show a growing interest in content creating professions such as influencing in younger generations (BBC Newsround, 2019).

Gen Z is also expected to switch jobs more quickly as they value flexibility. One survey showed that managers find them more difficult to work with than other generations as they have high expectations from their work, expect to be listened to and valued for their opinions, and expect social responsibility (Brower, 2024).

Against this backdrop of being a digitally skilled, ambitious and outspoken generation, official statistics and reports portray the transition of youth in the workplace as different. There are major concerns on how the pandemic has marked their prospects, youth labour rights in new forms of employment and whether the current educational systems are adequately preparing them for the new digitised world of work. Moreover, it is important to note the global differences in access, connectivity and infrastructure, which deeply condition the digital economy and preparedness of the workforce.

More vulnerable after the pandemic

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), while the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digitalisation of work, it also aggravated unemployment in youth. Long periods of unemployment as well as underemployment in youth can negatively impact an individual's lifetime earnings (Charles et al. 2022).

The oldest members of Gen Z just entered the workforce in 2020. The younger members, however, would start their professional careers after the pandemic — in which, according to the ILO, hybrid and virtual workspaces will be the norm. The impact of hybrid and virtual workspaces on employee motivation and wellbeing are only just becoming known. The right to disconnect is a proposed law in some countries, primarily in Europe, while in other cases this right is present in company policy.

A few years after the measures taken during the pandemic, countries are starting to perceive the impact that COVID-19 has had on the quality of education and training, the transition of youth into work, and the rise of NEET (not in employment, education or training). According to the ILO, 21.7% of youth worldwide are considered NEET, a higher percentage of which are youth residing in low to middle-income countries. Studies show how youth unemployment can, on an individual level, have a direct impact on long term prospects and, on a national level, undermine social and economic growth (Ibid.).

Platform work; majority young and male

Digitalisation impacts all sectors and occupations and as these technologies advance, workers must adapt and change to new scenarios. The digitalisation of work spans low-skill occupations such as platform work and data annotation to highly skilled workers, software engineers and influencers (Croce and Musa, 2019).

According to the ILO, the global digital workforce is on average younger than the broader workforce and more male (Charles et al. 2022). New employment that has arisen from the digital economy, such as platform work, proposes a new set of challenges to labour regulation. Although it is difficult to quantify the number of people working on online platforms,[4] the trends point towards them being young across the board (Kässi et al. 2021). Looking at digital platform workers in Europe, most fall under the age of 30 and are more likely to be male and have a high level of education (Eurostat Statistics Explained, 2023). In the US, 30% of 18–29-year-olds have at one time in their life earned money through an online platform with the number dropping to 18% for those older than 30 and 13% for those older than 50 (Anderson et al. 2021).

New types of employment like platform work, along with the associated digital and global aspects, make it hard to analyse the impact this type of work is having on youth and their rights. Although there are opportunities for youth to access higher-paid employment and flexible jobs, there are concerns regarding adequate social protection, financial support for work-related devices and reskilling opportunities (Ibid.).

[4] Most online work is done as a side job, which may result in workers not considering it as official employment or they may not declare their earnings to official agencies.

Influencers and aspirational labour

Social media and online platforms have played an important role in generating new forms of employment. So much so that new terminology has risen to make reference to new types of work and workers such as "playbour",[5] "hetermated labour"[6] and "prosumer".[7] User-generated content on social media platforms such as YouTube and TikTok drives revenue for the companies behind them, while often providing little to no compensation for the creators themselves and with little transparency or control over their data. However, some content creators do earn a living through content generation. Researchers also make mention of other forms of capital — social capital and cultural capital — gaining exposure, building networks and personal brands which might provide benefits and opportunities for users in the long term.

For youth, being active agents in the digital economy may offer other benefits. Online platforms provide tools and spaces for youth to be creative, express themselves and develop skills that may be beneficial for their career later in life. Digital media lowers the barrier to entry for youth to gain exposure and might see content creation as an investment for long term opportunities. Academic and author Brooke Duffy coined the term *aspirational labour*[8] to describe this phenomenon (Lombana-Bermudez et al. 2020). However, as mentioned earlier, informal forms of digital employment can be precarious and can devalue the job market as free labour can undercut professional wages and job availability.

There is very little data on those individuals who engage and or depend on content creation work. However, it has been reported that the top 10 YouTubers collectively made about 300 million USD on average in 2021 (Brown and Freeman, 2022). There is a need for metrics to evaluate and measure contributions that youth make on digital platforms. Youth participation and engagement on digital platforms blur the lines between work and play with youth often unaware of their rights and the impact their unpaid labour is generating for the platform. On the other hand, some experts argue this new informal economy has allowed young users to build their own opportunities and gain credibility causing adult stakeholders to become increasingly more interested in engaging youth in these sectors (Lombana-Bermudez et al. 2020).

Another important risk worth considering is the potential for the global digital divide to widen, as a lack of digital connectivity is an important barrier to online participation and acquiring digital skills. Younger generations who start transitioning into the world of work — especially those from advanced economies — would have had access to devices, digital literacy programs and informal forms of employment in their formative years. According to a report by UNICEF and ITU, 63% of young people aged 15-24 did not have access to an internet connection during the COVID-19 pandemic (United Nations Children's Fund and International Telecommunication

[5] Work generated around computer games and popular culture

[6] Low cost or free labour in online mediated networks

[7] Someone who both consumes and produces

[8] Youth and the Digital Economy: Exploring Youth Practices, Motivations, Skills, Pathways, and Value Creation

Union, 2020). Youth, and especially young women from low-income countries, used the internet the least, an aspect that must be considered to effectively promote digital equity in infrastructure, education and skilling programs (Ibid).

Skilled for the future

While concerns over digitalisation and the future of work are primarily centred on job loss, experts mainly agree that further digitalisation of the economy will more likely transform existing jobs and create new positions. In Europe, both low and high-skilled jobs will likely grow (Charles et al. 2022).

However, a key concern is whether there will be sufficient talent available to meet the needs of the job market. Although youth today are coined as digital natives questions remain as to whether they possess the digital skills needed for employment. According to a report by Gartner, one of the main challenges that hinder digital business growth is the lack of available talent and skills (Gartner Inc. 2019).

A survey conducted by Dell Technologies shows that many young people do not think they will be able to acquire the digital skills they need for work through school or on their own. The research found that 40% of the young people surveyed consider digital skills to be essential for career development (DELL Technologies, 2022).

A 2023 WEF report, which surveyed 803 companies drew a similar conclusion (World Economic Forum, 2023). More than half of the companies surveyed expect the adoption of new technologies and increased digital access to drive job growth. Digital transformation experts emphasise the need to invest in upskilling and reskilling efforts as recruiting externally for in-demand jobs is not a sustainable practice. Companies surveyed by the WEF report were optimistic about upskilling the existing workforce but are less confident regarding talent availability in the short term. Employers surveyed for the WEF report expect 44% of skills will be disrupted in the next five years. The types of skills growing in importance are cognitive skills — related to complex problem solving — and the third-fastest growing core skill is technological literacy.

There is also some debate regarding the skills the workforce can anticipate with the advent of generative AI. Companies and industry experts predict that skills needed for augmented working would be more critical with the rise of low-code/no-code solutions. While there is a need to understand the foundations of these technologies, skills such as critical thinking, communication and creativity are expected to be useful in working with technology (Marr, 2022).

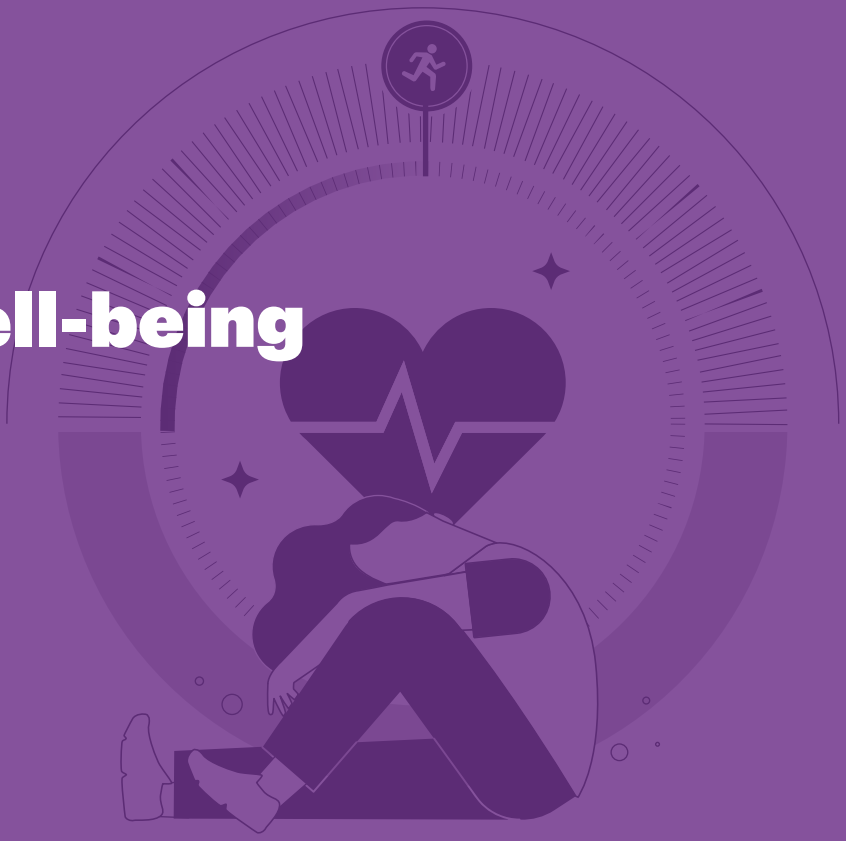
Things to consider:

There is great promise that the digitalisation of work brings with it opportunities to promote social and economic inclusion as barriers to access education, skills and training are lowered. The digital economy also offers emerging countries a chance to create sustainable growth and reduce inequalities (Srupsrisopa and Kumsopha, 2023).

However, as the digital economy provides some opportunities worldwide it also contributes to precarious and unpaid work. This not only widens the digital divide globally, between those regions that lack digital infrastructure and have a high percentage of mobile users, but can also be seen in more developed economies where meaningful digital access is highly correlated to socioeconomic factors.

New types of employment and new ways of engaging in the digital economy call for a greater understanding of how new types of work affect youth and rights. With regards to digital platform work, young users do have the opportunity to build their own skills and reputation but are more vulnerable due to a lack of social protection or adequate financial compensation. In traditional work settings, augmented working calls for technological know-how which is just as important as critical thinking, communication and creativity. To ensure the digital economy is inclusive and responsive to youth needs, it is also fundamental to consider those youth who are NEET, especially young women from low-income countries. The design of digital spaces and digital skills training when considering economic and social barriers must leverage equity-deserving youth to engage and participate in digital technologies in meaningful ways.

05 Health and well-being



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According to research conducted by consulting firms, Gen Z reported higher rates of anxiety and depression than any other age group during the pandemic. An Oliver Wyman survey of youth in the US and UK describes a shift in thinking about health and healthcare that is characteristic of this generation (Kreacic et al. 2023). The research shows that Gen Z are more concerned about health and well-being, are less stigmatised about mental health, and adopt a more holistic approach to their health than their predecessors. They are more receptive to trying out digital tools and are more likely to share health data and use social media to source medical information. Characterised as idealists, they seek justice in healthcare, which falls in line with other characteristics used to describe this cohort as moved by inequalities (Ibid.). According to the McKinsey Consumer Health Insights Survey 2021, this cohort also reported more unmet social needs than any other generation — income, employment, education, food, housing, etc. (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

Mental health crises

There is a general concern worldwide about the decline of mental health and well-being overall due to the pandemic and economic crises (Ipsos, 2023). However, as research has shown, this concern is especially prevalent in youth. In 2021, following the pandemic, the US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy released an advisory on youth mental health (Insel, 2023). In several EU countries, the number of young people (aged 18–29) reporting symptoms of depression more than doubled during the pandemic. In Europe, suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15–19 while in the US it is third, following accidents and homicide (Insel, 2023; OECD/European Union, 2022).

There is debate on the causes of mental health crises among youth. Youth and the transition to adulthood is a stage marked by physical, emotional and cognitive changes. Compared to older generations, youth, in general, report more negative feelings as they feel lost — searching for purpose and motivation in life. Generations also seek to be comparable or better than the generations that preceded them, particularly concerning education, work and career path (Committee on Social Affairs, 2023).

A series of factors are contributing to the decline in youth mental health and well-being. As mentioned previously, the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on youth satisfaction compared to older groups. Some experts argue that capitalism and focus on consumerism are leading to increased feelings of loneliness, while others attribute negative feelings to ongoing conflicts and the climate crisis. Youth-specific factors such as job insecurity and, in some contexts, lack of access to affordable healthcare, may also contribute (Committee on Social Affairs, 2023).

Along with these previous concerns, one of the factors that has dominated the debate on mental health and well-being in youth is their pervasive use of digital technologies, specifically social media. Some experts suggest this may be a result of a generational bias. New technologies may be the new scapegoat of mental health — as older generations tend to find a fault in how new technologies impact youth (Doucleff, 2023).

Research on digital technologies and mental health

Research exploring the overuse of the internet by adolescents started to appear in the early 2000s (Gross et al. 2002) while research on social media and its effect on mental health began in 2017 (Alter, 2023). Moreover, the debate became especially heated in recent years with legislation on online safety and the revelations of former Facebook and data scientist whistleblower, Frances Haugen, who claimed that Facebook, now Meta, was aware of the impact that Instagram was having on teenage mental health (Doucleff 2023).

Some researchers suggest social media use contributes to the increase in anxiety and depression recorded among this generation, as social comparison increases levels of general dissatisfaction. However, studies have shown that the relationship between internet use and mental health is complex and inconclusive (Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023).

To date, public health officials have highlighted the potential risks digital technologies may pose to mental health and well-being but have not made a direct correlation as existing evidence fails to make the case. One study reviewing existing research has found a need for longitudinal research — going beyond WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) societies (Odgers and Jensen, 2020). There are also several factors present in these studies that make it hard to support the argument. Some experts argue that most studies rely on nonrepresentative samples that make it difficult to generalise about a larger population of adolescents. Furthermore, studies often analyse total screen time in relation to well-being.

As youth increasingly depend on digital technologies for different purposes including education, leisure, communication and socialisation, some interactions may be positive and others negative, which is a nuance overlooked if only examining screen time.

What researchers do agree on, however, is that online risks are often a mirror of offline vulnerabilities. Studies have shown how adolescents that are at risk of bullying are also at risk of being cyberbullied (Kowalski et al. 2014). Additionally, those who have existing mental health problems or are struggling with body image issues may have a lower tolerance for online risks (Odgers et al. 2022). However, it is difficult to discern cause from effect as these two are deeply intertwined. Online experiences are also deeply shaped by an individual's race, ethnicity, geographic location and socioeconomic background. Youth who face problems offline are more likely to encounter them online. While those who have access to more financial resources or have more social capital — usually reap the same benefits online as they do offline (Odgers, 2018).

For youth who belong to racial, ethnic, sexual and gender minorities, digital technologies may present both benefits and risks to their health and well-being. Studies have shown individuals suffering discrimination, loneliness or exclusion offline may feel more accepted and supported on social media. They may also be more inclined to seek mental help online, as the online environment provides anonymity and privacy and lowers barriers to access. On the other hand, as discussed, the online environment may pose risks for those who are most vulnerable, aggravating existing conditions. For example, for young women and girls, content may perpetuate body image concerns and eating disorders. (Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023)

Things to consider

While current legislation is being crafted to ensure a safer and more secure online experience for youth, and as societies move towards more digitised ways of working, living and socialising, online spaces need to be designed with and for them. Experts are divided as to what extent internet use and social media are impacting youth today, and whether Gen Z's concerns over their mental health are related to the stage at which they are in life or if it is a trend that marks the generation as they grow older. There is a need to conduct further research, however, as the complexity of this issue ensures drawing reliable conclusions will be difficult.

The risk of attributing the state of mental health in youth to digital technologies, lies in overlooking other factors that can play an important role in helping youth get the help they need. Looking forward, experts highlight the need to prepare all generations in understanding and developing the skills they need to better use digital technologies to maximise the benefits of being online. Experts and human rights advocates, emphasise the danger of restricting access to technologies, as restriction not only infringes the rights of young people, but also can limit their access to information and social support.

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Conclusion

This whitepaper seeks to broaden debate and offer a space to reflect on the deeper complexities surrounding Gen Z, youth and digital inclusion that go beyond the headlines and generalisations currently discussed. Accordingly, a series of key takeaways from the whitepaper can be found below. As digital technologies evolve rapidly, it is essential to understand the limitations of current research and how popular perceptions may in fact, exclude youth from decision-making spaces. It is fundamental for policymakers, technologists, civil society organisations, educators and youth to work together to ensure online spaces are inclusive, safe and accessible to all. Youth are important stakeholders in the design and governance of online spaces, and their voices and perspectives are essential in ensuring that the rights we have today are preserved and defended in online interactions, and moreover they become actors in shaping a digital future that is more equitable and sustainable.

Apply a holistic lens around youth and promote meaningful youth engagement.

- Youth is a social construct and therefore a fluid concept that depends on historical, cultural and societal perceptions. While in many cases it is defined as a transition into adulthood, youth is a broader concept that can include people of many ages and at different life stages. Furthermore, gender, religion, socio-economic status, disability, sexual orientation and geographic location are all factors that condition the experience of young people. Those who design digital policies must be mindful of the diversity of this group and apply a holistic and intersectional lens to adequately understand the youth experience. Moreover, existing policies and interventions must be mindful of the biases towards youth engrained in societies and present both online and offline.

- To craft inclusive digital policies and understand the impact and implications of young people's use of the internet, online governance should meaningfully include youth as a part of decision-making processes. As seen throughout this whitepaper there are many examples in which different levels of government engage youth in online governance. However, there is a risk that these gestures could be tokenistic. There are a number a resources for organisations that can provide a framework for effective youth participation. For example, the UN has produced a policy brief on meaningful youth engagement in policymaking[9] and a toolkit for UN staff on meaningfully engaging with youth.[10]

[9] See: https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/our-common-agenda-policy-brief-youth-engagement-en.pdf

[10] See: https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2021/05/Meaningfully-engaging-youth-Guidance-training-UN-staff.pdf

Use generational labels with caution as they may oversimplify youth's online experience.

- Using generational labels to understand shifts in the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and habits of generational cohorts can be useful to understand societal change. However, many publications that do so, and more specifically relating to Gen Z as discussed throughout this paper, are limited. Communicators and researchers who undertake generational studies should communicate the limitations of their studies, as surveys and studies of generational cohorts may oversimplify and overlook differences within the cohort. Moreover, especially with generations that coincide with important life stages such as youth or old age, interpretations of studies should be careful in assessing whether characteristics can be attributed to a generation, or whether there are other factors, beyond age, that contribute to trends.

- For example, the Pew Research Center only conducts generational analysis when the data allows the researchers to compare with other generations at the same stage of life. Comparing age groups over time, such as young adults in the present to the past, may provide a clearer picture of shifts between generations. Digital technologies present a challenge to generational research given that the use of digital technologies is relatively novel and difficult to draw comparisons with older generations and similar life stages.

- Researchers who study generations share a great responsibility in accurately framing their analysis as such assumptions about generations could lead to discrimination or propagate ageism.

Avoid terms such as digital natives, that portray a simplistic view of youth's relationship with technology.

- Although the term digital native has been debunked by academics and educational experts, the term is still widely used and has had a long term impact on digital policy. The concept of digital native and particularly pairing it with younger generations is misguided. Meaningful digital access is far from universal and although there are generations today that have grown up in a world in which mobile and digital technologies are omnipresent, digital skills are a lifelong task and shift according to a person's needs and motivations. Digital native narratives promote a simplistic view of technology. They are either victims of their frequent use of technology or possess a natural talent for using technology. These views can undermine efforts in adequately educating and training youth in their use of new technologies and overshadow the existing digital inequalities among youth today.

Conduct more research on youth and technology, understanding when generational analysis is necessary.

- There are significant gaps in research regarding youth, Gen Z and digital technologies. Furthermore, as technologies evolve rapidly, there is a significant challenge for researchers to understand how digital technologies impact people over time. As mentioned earlier, there is a need for longitudinal studies to measure and monitor the impact of digital technology usage and more urgently, there are significant data lacking in non-WEIRD contexts.

- Moreover, most of the current research is based on traditional methods in social science, such as surveys and interviews, which at times can limit representation and may show bias in self-reporting. Researchers agree there is great potential for innovation in this field — such as conducting studies relying on data collected by private companies to gain a deeper understanding of youth's digital media use or clinical studies to understand the neurological effects of digital media usage.

- Other challenges that limit our current understanding of the impact digital technologies are having is the lack of a standardised terminology — a point mentioned by the WEF as they seek to promote and facilitate a common terminology to discuss online harms. Moreover, this challenge is accentuated by the rapid evolution of digital technologies, in which, for example, the term *screentime* can apply to all types of screens ranging from TV to mobiles and potentially VR goggles. To appropriately analyse youths' interaction with digital media, a common terminology will be necessary to compare different contexts and measure how technologies impact generations over time.

Empower youth through accessible and up-to-date media literacy education.

- When consulted, young people point out the need for appropriate and up-to-date digital literacy education. As mentioned previously, youth are a diverse group meaning digital literacy efforts should be holistic and adopt an intersectional lens. They should adapt to the needs and motivations of the learner and furthermore, allow them to feel empowered to make critical use of digital technologies.

- The several challenges and risks youth face online are highly intertwined with their offline experiences. Digital technologies offer youth channels for expression, communication, community building, play and learning. Education programmes should not address the online world as separate from their offline experiences. They should ensure youth feel empowered and motivated to make their own decisions in choosing the technologies and online experiences best suited for them through the guidance of mentors, educators, coworkers and friends.

- Moreover, media literacy education is a lifelong journey. There are many milestones that young adults will experience for the first time, such as managing online banking, filing taxes, looking for employment and making travel plans. Empowering youth to become active voices in the design and implementation of digital technologies will allow them to communicate the valuable lessons they learn in their transition into adulthood to better address gaps in skills programmes.

Promote a rights-based approach to digital spaces that includes youth perspectives.

- Exposure to security and privacy risks, disinformation and misinformation, and harms to well-being are some of the risks and challenges that young people face when using digital technologies. Although digital literacy programmes are key for ensuring that youth are empowered and educated to use and navigate digital technologies safely and freely, only relying on educational measures puts the burden on the user to protect their rights. Private companies are currently leading the technology agenda and can mitigate risks by ensuring the design and governance of digital platforms and tools respect youth's rights. As discussed in the whitepaper, there is legislation promoting a youth sensitive approach in the digital spaces.

- However, to ensure legislation is effective, it is fundamental that companies cooperate and understand the needs of their most vulnerable users. This includes ensuring users have sovereignty over their data, that information and policies are transparent, algorithms are audited and inspected to ensure they prioritise user trust and safety, and the implementation of accessible and age-friendly channels to ensure accountability.

Address digital inequalities among youth.

- Narratives surrounding youth and digital technologies tend to portray Gen Z and youth as always connected. However, not all youth enjoy equal access to digital spaces and tools. As previously stated, there is a significant difference between those young people who live in high-income countries and those who live in middle to low-income countries. The gap is then further diversified by other factors, such as gender, urban/rural access, educational background, etc. Not only is there a digital divide in physical access that effects equity deserving groups, but these groups are also more vulnerable to online harms and diminished well-being. Therefore, different digital divides must be addressed simultaneously through measures including improving digital infrastructure and access to resources in underserved areas and engaging in meaningful consultation with equity-deserving youth to ensure the design and policy of digital tools count on their experiences and perspectives.

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