A National Youth Trends and Be Internet Citizens report on how Gen Z navigates the world of social media.
CONTENTS

FOREWORD 3

INTRODUCTIONS 5

HOW WE GOT HERE 8

METHOD 9

Key trend: The Platform Monopoly 11
Key trend: Privacy is Power 22
Key trend: Our Voice, Our Views 30
Key trend: Digital Detoxing 35
Impact: The Good, The Bad and The Ugly 40
Recommendations 42

OUTRO 43

The Contributors 44
Thanks & Partners 47
Bibliography 48
It’s no understatement that Covid-19 changed the world forever. It’s arguable that one of the most impacted groups of society will be Generation Z; they were teenagers and young adults in the first lockdown and their lives will be affected for years to come in ways we cannot yet fully appreciate. During the pandemic, 70% of young people felt an increased pressure to be online (National Youth Trends, Take the Temperature, 2020). Faced by rising content consumption, a mere 1% of young people were not on social media (National Youth Trends, Institutions of the Future, 2021). According to Ofcom (2021), 6% of UK homes (1.5 million) have no access to the internet, compared to 11% in March 2020. As more people gain access to the internet at home and in their hand, we expect to see nearly all young people spending at least some time online in the very near future.

We have an increasing wealth of information at our fingertips. And the constant influx of content across social media platforms means as a society we need to be well equipped to understand the digital space. In particular, raising awareness to younger generations.

Findings from the The Institute of Strategic Dialogue (2019) show just “2% of children have the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake”. Alongside this, “1 out of 3 British children aged 12-15 have encountered sexist, racist or discriminatory content online”.

Clearly, this raises serious alarm bells. It has also inspired the work of the Be Internet Citizens Programme which aims to empower and encourage young people to be good digital citizens, become safer users of the internet and make positive contributions online.

Our work at Beatfreeks aims to contribute to this, by understanding how young people in the UK consume and engage with the internet since the outbreak of Coronavirus and the significant increase in global online consumption. Together we can empower young people, helping them be their best selves on social media and beyond.
HOW CAN WE MAKE SURE WE PLAY OUR PART TO SECURE A BETTER INTERNET SO THAT YOUNG PEOPLE CAN THRIVE?

Young people take to the internet to tell their stories, create social change and build the vision they want to see. Whilst it can be a force for good - it can present challenges too.

This report offers a snapshot of what young people specifically are experiencing on social media - and how the pandemic has impacted communities.

In listening to young people, the pressures they face online and their ideas for the future, we take on a vital step in creating an online environment that is safe and open. Some of the issues you’ll read about are not new - but this report shows they are still relevant today and need to be addressed.

As policy makers for digital platforms, and as human beings using the internet ourselves - we must take these research findings and reflect on how we can make sure we play our part to secure a better internet so that young people can thrive.

Rima Amin
Policy Manager - Change.org
INTRODUCTION

Gen Zs. AKA the digital natives. The most prolific generation of content consumers and creators we’ve ever known. The smartphone generation who are “always on”, and who’ve never known a life without the internet.

And always on socials, Gen Zs most definitely are: 99% are on some form of social media, according to our Institutions of the Future report. Hands up if you know the 1% who aren’t? Us neither.

For brands and other organisations (from funders to the government) to be able to build a more relevant society, we need to truly understand Gen Z. Only then can we know the digital needs, issues, innovations and ideas of the largest generation in human history.

This report aims to help you do just that. To provide a totally transparent and real-life snapshot into the social media experiences of UK-based 16-25-year-olds. By better understanding Covid-19’s ongoing effect on their experiences, we’ll ultimately provide you with the insights you need to be as relevant as you can be.

And who doesn’t want to be relevant?
Beatfreeks is a full service insight and engagement agency specialising in increasing relevance with young and diverse audiences. We ready our clients to brave the future by connecting them to the largest generation in human history.

The model is simple: the more young people exercise their influence, the more relevant businesses become. Both parties win and society becomes more democratic.

We’ve mobilised a digital reach of millions to conduct groundbreaking research, launch impactful content campaigns and deliver authentic co-creation sessions with tens of thousands of Gen Zs over the last year alone.

Why? Because Gen Z is the future:
- More than 50% of the world’s population is under the age of 30
- 30% of the world’s population is Gen Z

National Youth Trends is Beatfreeks’ channel for all things young people, youth voice and pop culture in the UK today. You’ll find thoughts on hot topics, some stone-cold memes, a truly undeniable statistics game and a chance to benefit your organisation through insights based on our research with thousands of young people.

The stats and stories you’ll read are all collected as part of our research and work with 16-25s across the UK. It’s our mission to make businesses more relevant to everyone. The way we think that can happen is by organisations listening to, consulting with, then acting upon the voices and needs of young people.

By engaging with the findings and trends from this research, your business can directly respond to the needs of Gen Z, stay relevant and start you on the journey of becoming an Institution of the Future.

www.beatfreeks.com
@Beatfreeks

NATIONAL YOUTH TRENDS X BIC THE SOCIAL SNAPSHOT
The Be Internet Citizens programme, supported by Google.org and YouTube - aims to empower young people with the confidence to create online content; content that enables them to express their identities, share their stories, make a social impact, and bring communities together. In short, creating a safe, inspiring space for young people to create, be and belong.
This research project is a collaboration between National Youth Trends and the Be Internet Citizens project to understand more about how Gen Z engage with the digital space. This work has been conducted in line with National Youth Trends research methodologies and explores issues young people face and how they relate to their digital experience of the world.
The questions explored in this report were co-created with a group of Gen Zs. The data was collected from people aged 16-25 years across the UK (including England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales).

Our survey gathered responses from 1,021 Gen Zers. Responses were segmented via constituency and analysed relative to deprivation as mapped in the English Indices of Deprivation 2019. The English Indices of Deprivation measure relative levels of deprivation in 32,844 small areas or neighbourhoods, called Lower-layer Super Output Areas, in England.

This can allow Beatfreeks and other organisations to better create services to suit the individual experiences and immediate needs of young people in the digital world.

We also ran focus groups to better understand the opinions and issues faced by Gen Z on the digital space. This included a week-long Whatsapp diary project where we commissioned young people from different backgrounds and locations to complete a series of diary entries based on daily prompts. Following this, a group of Gen Z content creators helped us interpret the report findings, giving us their views and insight on the trends.
HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE CONSUME, CURATE AND SHARE CONTENT?
The Platform Monopoly
Consumption: where to find GenZ

So we know that 2021 was our most “digital year to date” (as shown in National Youth Trends’ The 2nd Dose).

But cast your minds back to 2020 (weekly Zoom quiz, anyone? *shudders*) and Instagram was the reigning champ of social (as per our Institutions of the Future report); everyone and their dog posted pics of banana bread or boomerangs of burpees with Joe Wicks.

Fast forward to 2022 and things have shifted: in our recent investigation, which surveyed over 1,000 Gen Zs, we found that the most popular platforms (i.e. those used every day for frequent content consumption) are now Instagram (48%), TikTok (45%), YouTube (38%), Facebook (29%) and Twitter (14%).

And what about messaging? The most popular platforms (used frequently every day) were Snapchat (43%) and WhatsApp (36%). WhatsApp was used at least once a week by 85% while Snapchat was used by 72%. On a day-to-day basis, more females than males used the platforms - 19% more on Snapchat and 11% on WhatsApp. How affluent the area was didn’t seem to affect the experience. Snapchat was used more frequently every day by the younger end of the Gen Zs (aged 16-19), while WhatsApp was used more frequently daily by the older Gen Zs (aged 20-25).

Platforms which are used at least once a week are YouTube (91%), Instagram (81%), TikTok (78%), Facebook (71%) and Twitter (54%). Although YouTube remains the biggest video-sharing platform on the planet, TikTok is certainly a strong contender. Which is better? That’s a discussion for another day. All we’re saying is that Gen Alpha (yes, it’s a thing!) regards YouTube as the ‘coolest brand’ out there.

The least used daily platforms, and sometimes ones not known about, were Pinterest (5%), LinkedIn (5%), Reddit (4%) and Tumblr (3%). For instance, 21% haven’t heard of LinkedIn and 19% haven’t heard of Reddit.

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<th>Platform</th>
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"TikTok is both good and bad; it's my main source of entertainment, and I love it. However I have become addicted, and my attention span is absolutely minuscule now."

But enough about the least used channels. Where are Gen Z at? Well, Insta, you need to watch your back; TikTok's coming for ya. It's gone from one of the least-used to most-used platforms in the space of a couple of years.

TikTok is used more frequently every day by the younger Gen Zs (aged 16-21) than the older Gen Z (aged 22-25), while Facebook is used more by the older groups (aged 22-25) compared to younger groups (aged 16-21). Instagram and YouTube? They don't appear to vary by age.

TikTok is clearly having an impact on young minds. An investigation into whether the platform is designed to negatively affect young people's physical health and mental wellbeing has been launched in the US.

Previous research has shown that the rapid succession of short-form videos triggers a dopamine rush, making it harder for young people to:

- Stop watching
- Focus on other tasks
- Adapt to a slower-paced non-digital activity
And it’s not just Gen Z who are affected. Toddlers are reportedly using TikTok. Research by Ofcom reveals that 16% of 3-4 year-olds and a third of 5-7 year-olds are viewing TikTok content.

In fact, **70% of young people felt increased pressure to be online because of the pandemic** (National Youth Trends, Take the Temperature, 2020).

Lockdown prompted a shift away from Instagram. **TikTok became the most downloaded app** in 2020, with many young people finding Instagram “too serious”, too focused on appearance and too fixated on perfection. TikTok presented an alternative – somewhere you could laugh, have fun and be yourself.

It’s not just the platforms that have shifted; it’s also the type of content consumed. Instagram and TikTok were used heavily during lockdown as a method of self-preservation:

> “In lockdown everything shifted online and you didn’t have a choice; either “be online or be alone”.

> “It was a way to cope as lockdown was so horrible”.
“People came together as they didn’t want to be alone”.

Due to young people having more time on their hands during the lockdown period, they were able to explore and more widely engage with the platform:

“More time in lockdown – we were supposed to be doing exams and we didn’t, so we had more time to explore”.

Of course, we don’t have to be in the midst of a lockdown to let our imaginations run wild on social media. The internet was ablaze when one Twitter user asked: are there more doors or wheels in the world? The ultimate in escapism, we love a debate like this because there’s simply no right or wrong answer.

“I know that it’s not a serious topic, like at all, but it’s been interesting to me to see so many people come together and debate a single topic and to see their reasoning for it and I find it fun to debate it with my friends and also random people through TikTok.”
**Control: who’s steering the wheel?**

Do social channels hold the power? 71% said that social media platforms have control over the type of content we see on our feeds, whereas only 8% disagreed that social media has control.

But with 99% of Gen Zs on some form of social media (as revealed in our Institutions of the Future report), it’s nice to think we have some control.

60% agreed that they have control to some extent over what they see on their feed, and only a fifth (19%) disagreed that they have any content control. This goes to show that although social media may primarily control what we see, we do have the power to take back those reins.

Our WhatsApp diaries, which spanned over the course of a week, found that Gen Z consciously engage with and share content that they find relevant and interesting – mainly content that’s motivational, entertaining and informative in nature, with key posts relating to current affairs/politics, self-empowerment/studying, cooking, sports/gym and pets.

Young people are actively searching for the kind of content they want to consume. A fact that matches up with previous insights from National Youth Trends’ The 2nd Dose: 97% of young people were highly conscious of their online consumption habits and the impact it had on them, while only 3% weren’t really sure of what they look for in social media content – a figure that challenges the narrative that social media is always a passive act.

"I came across this ad on Facebook which was really relevant to my location, age and interests. I love Wagamama’s food and go a lot to the restaurant in my city (which is creepy that Facebook knows this), I am also a student and feel this tailored ad is very important."

Whether it’s blocking other users, muting their feed or unfollowing them, young people are clearly in the hot seat when it comes to choosing what they want to see: 87% reported to take control of the content that’s shown on their feed.

And regular blockers and muters they are too: of those who reported to take control, 70% do this at least once a month and 40% at least once a week.
Share a dialogue, not a monologue

Ever feel like you’re in a social media echo chamber? Confirmation bias (and some pretty powerful algorithms) mean the more we’re exposed to hate speech, the more we seek content from like-minded users.

Gen Z don’t just want one-sided stories. Which might be why 51% of Gen Zs said they try to curate their feeds so they consume content from people with opposing (as well as similar) views to them. Just 18% said they avoided it. Of those consuming content containing a range of opinions, the majority (66%) said they felt in control of the type of content they were seeing. However, 21% didn’t feel they had the ability to curate their feeds.

The rise of so-called dark social plays into this idea of greater curation. People are choosing to share content privately through Telegram, Reddit, Discord and WhatsApp. On one hand, a great way to avoid trolls, but on the other, you create a network of forums that are extremely difficult to police.

We wanted to find out what a group of young people thought. The feedback was mixed. They felt they were more selective about how they consume content from people with opposing views than the survey suggested. But they are also aware that certain platforms (such as news channels) are biased in their reporting, filtering out information that doesn’t ‘fit’ a particular narrative.

"When I viewed content today I did feel that it was representative of me and my opinions. I think this is because I make a point of following people who share the same views as me or have the same struggles, so most of the content I see is of people who understand or have the same views."
As a result, they recognise the importance of understanding the bigger picture – something that comes with exposure to opposing views. As one young person explained: “Young people want to curate their feeds, making sure views cover both sides of the conversation.”

They agreed that some opposing views (such as racist comments) should be kept off limits and have boundaries in place to ensure those views are also kept off their feeds. But other topics (such as current affairs or anything educational) give users a better grasp of the wider picture and should be sought out. Since 2020, we’ve seen increasing levels of censorship, with social media platforms frequently silencing users. Unsurprisingly, it has become an incredibly divisive topic.

If content doesn’t align with societal views, is deemed too political, or uses certain words or phrases, it’s censored. One respondent used TikTok as an example: “Users are finding ways to include censored words in their content - by writing words such as ‘disabled’ as a car number plate: D1sAb13d.”

And let’s not forget the allegations that TikTok’s algorithm is racist, with creators arguing that their content is valued less and censored more than their white peers. Black creators showed their frustration with the #BlackTikTok strike, where Black creators chose not to create choreography for Megan thee Stallion's "Thot S---" to stop non-Black creators from profiting off their work.

The aim of this censorship is to reduce the number of users having negative online experiences. But is it working?
According to our survey, not really. It revealed that 85% have witnessed and 72% have personally faced negative or hateful content on social media.

More specifically, Gen Zers have experienced the following content:

- Sexist: 39% experienced, 57% witnessed
- Cyber Bullying: 38% experienced, 53% witnessed
- Racist: 29% experienced, 59% witnessed
- Violent: 29% experienced, 48% witnessed
- Homophobic: 24% experienced, 51% witnessed
- Transphobic: 15% experienced, 41% witnessed
- Ableist: 13% experienced, 29% witnessed
Too many young people are coming across negative/hateful content on social media. 28% reported that they haven’t personally experienced it, while just 15% haven’t witnessed it.

It appears certain groups are more likely to be exposed to online negativity than others. For example, users from less affluent areas are 7-10% more likely to experience cyber bullying, or sexist, racist or homophobic content. Daily users of Instagram, TikTok and YouTube are most at risk, followed by daily users of Facebook.

National Youth Trends’ The 2nd Dose found that some groups are more at risk of hate speech, and our present research confirms that: those who identify as female were more at risk of exposure to sexist content (45% vs 26%) and cyber bullying (42% vs 31%) than males. While males were more likely to experience violent content than females (32% vs 26%).

The 2nd Dose found that social media had negative outcomes for non-binary and intersex individuals, as they were more at risk of hate speech online. In a recent survey we found further evidence that non-binary individuals were most at risk from personally experiencing a growing amount of hateful content online. They were most likely to experience sexist content (60%), cyber bullying (50%) and homophobic content (50%).

Contrary to popular opinion, young people are taking the initiative when dealing with inappropriate content. 76% take initiatives to report this kind of content, with 28% doing so on a weekly basis.

“If the content is negative, but doesn’t go against a platform’s guidelines, is not unlawful, and unlikely to harm anyone, I wouldn’t report it. But if the opposite was true, I would definitely report the matter.”

As this quote from one young person proves, they’re aware, alert, and feel they have a responsibility to act.

The reality is that Gen Z content creators are exposed to online content on a daily basis. When asked why they think this is the case, they listed a number of reasons:

- The perceived idea of anonymity
- People jumping on the bandwagon
- Not viewing content in its entirety before posting

“@shvetza
“It’s so easy to be insulting from behind a screen.”

KEY TREND | THE PLATFORM MONOPOLY
Social media platforms use complex algorithms to serve content they think we want to see. But the impact of these algorithms runs much deeper, affecting how young people create and post content, too. The way platforms are structured and set boundaries for content creation serve to regulate the content being produced.
Privacy is power
Young people use social media for various reasons – to document their lives, make a connection with others, better understand the world around them, or in a professional capacity.

They also use it as a way to generate income. It can be lucrative, with 49% of respondents having made money through social media, through:

- Selling products (23%)
- Being paid for content (19%)
- Networking (17%)

Males were more likely than females (61% vs 43%) to generate income through social media. But not everyone is making money via these platforms. 51% have not made any revenue, with the majority of those (60%) living in less affluent areas.
Posting more, posting less: Content creation during lockdown

Think lockdown, think of a life online (when you weren’t going out for your daily walk). Social media became one of the only ways to “see” friends and family, with many of our daily interactions mediated by screens. Things have moved on since then. That willingness to share all our experiences (including what we had for breakfast, lunch and dinner) has fizzled out. Now sharing is more limited, private and dictated by platform usage.

But the pandemic did drive a more positive change in the world of influence: authenticity is a real buzzword right now. Thanks to the rise of TikTok and reels, over-produced, filtered-the-cr*p-out-of content is becoming less and less desirable. Which explains why new kid on the block platform Be Real is really gaining traction: a social channel with no filters, no like button and no ads, where users share just one photo a day of what they’re up to in that moment in time.

When we were in the midst of a global pandemic, the majority of young people were posting daily. They saw sharing entertainment, daily events, and life’s milestones as a way to keep others in the loop – both of their own lives and work and also of the issues that resonated with them.
At the other end of the scale were those young people who didn’t share content during the pandemic. Their reasons for retreating from social media were varied:

- **Wanting privacy**
- **Avoiding the pressures of posting**
- **Fear of getting no likes and feeling unappreciated**
- **Conscious of perceptions of others**
- **Wanting to keep their feeds private for close friends and family (avoid jealousy)**
But to regulate this and keep things more private, content was shared within smaller groups – via close friend stories, private stories or Snapchat.

We were interested to hear why young people post content and how they felt afterwards. Here’s what they had to say:

We’re not supposed to be good at everything.

“I’m often afraid that I’ve accidentally shared fake or inaccurate news.”

“Posting always makes me slightly anxious. However, three of my friends replied positively to my post today, reducing that anxiety.”

“I didn’t post anything today. I just wanted to lurk on social media instead of actively posting. It avoids the pressure of having to post the right kind of things.”

“Today I enjoyed a lot of motivational posts, tips, empowering quotes. I equally engaged with a few recent posts from my favourite artists/celebrities.”

“Posting always makes me slightly anxious. However, three of my friends replied positively to my post today, reducing that anxiety.”

Social media makes people think by the age of 21–23 you suppose to drive a foreign car, own a house, run a business, body on fleek, own all the designer … Relax… don’t rush your processes or think you’re less than because of what social media displays.

“Today I enjoyed a lot of motivational posts, tips, empowering quotes. I equally engaged with a few recent posts from my favourite artists/celebrities.”

“I did feel certain empowerment though when I saw posts promoting International Women’s Day.”

10 Ways to Be a Mentally Stronger Person

Brought to you by @GERRICHEW
And that’s OK. But try explaining that to a content creator looking for as many likes, views and followers as possible. There’s a huge amount of pressure attached to regular posting on social media.

From personal triumphs to professional achievements, it can feel like everyone else is more talented, happy and self-assured. Our survey showed that 43% of young people recognise that pressure (24% neither agree nor disagreed and 32% disagreed to some extent).

Content creators want their posts to perform well. That’s human nature. But this quest for ‘success’ has led half (50%) to intentionally change content (e.g. adding hashtags to draw attention) based on what they imagine an algorithm wants to see. 28% could neither agree nor disagree that they changed their content for the algorithm, and only 22% disagreed.

As one young person put it: “I intentionally format my posts, so they reach more people. You have to use the algorithm to your advantage.”

Those intentionally changing content also feel more in control over what type of content they see on their feeds.

But while getting views and/or followers is important, our respondents recognised it’s not always possible to change factual content.

“I posted on my Instagram story today - partly because all of my friends were doing it and I wanted to feel included, and partly because I wanted a positive response from it.”

“I wanted to post something on my private story today to show I was still alive. I’ve been a bit quiet with messages and replying lately.”
SOCIAL MEDIA: ARE YOUNG PEOPLE’S VOICES BEING HEARD?

Young people are the leaders of today and tomorrow. It’s important their voices are heard.
Our voice, our views
Covid put limits on how much face-to-face socialising we could do. Social media allowed some of those interactions and conversations to continue – albeit virtually. It became a lifeline for friends and family wanting to stay connected. But more than that – it provided routes to forming new connections.

55% of young people said they made positive friendships and connected to communities online during the course of the pandemic – bonds that may never have been forged IRL. As one respondent stated: **“It enables people with very popular views and those with not popular views to come together.”**

Social media places a wealth of information at our fingertips. But with this abundance comes the risk of misinformation and underrepresentation.

Just take a look at these misinformation trends on TikTok right now regarding Ukraine. Thankfully, there are rumour-quashing individuals fighting to separate fact from fiction.

34% of social media users aged 16-25 years feel worse informed about world affairs because of the content they see on their social feeds. 23% of users feel they are better informed, while 43% reported that it balanced itself out.

An example of how social media is getting more voices heard can be seen in the discussion of men’s mental health. Once a taboo subject, today online conversations are helping destigmatise emotional vulnerability in men. As one young person explained: **“If you haven’t experienced mental health issues, someone in your close friends or family will have.”**
While social media platforms (rightly) get called out for misinformation, they also help shine a light on key issues such as climate change and Black Lives Matter. Social media activism helps to initiate change, but there are two sides to the coin.

41% of young people felt that social media activism allows them to learn new information and raise awareness, 27% felt it is good for generating donations and 23% felt it plays a key role in change making.

Young people from less affluent areas recognised the positives in social activism more readily than those from more affluent constituencies. For example: learning new information (46% vs 39%), generating donations (31% vs 25%) and change making (30% vs 21%).

But many young people feel that social activism could go further. 25% felt it is merely performative – making people look like they are doing the right thing. 22% felt it is not enough, 14% felt it doesn’t provoke change, 10% felt it is unsustainable, and 9% felt it is completely ineffective.

As expected, the findings are mixed but more young people see the potential for good, rather than its shortcomings.

Speaking about social media activism, Gen Z content creators agreed how useful it was for educating and spreading information. But only if that information is true, transparent and factual. They also recognise that social activism is potentially unsustainable, with people keen to move onto the next big thing before there’s been a chance for real momentum to grow.

When used effectively, social activism is a powerful force. But when used dishonestly or carelessly, the results are not as rosy. Celebrities and key figures using activism the wrong way can quickly find themselves at risk of being ‘cancelled’. Something that 43% of young people agree is a good thing (29% disagreed).
Predictions for 2022 suggest that Gen Z will interrogate cancel culture in a way they’ve not done before – they’ll be looking for sustained accountability and driving a positive change. Breaking down those percentages further we find differences in who believes cancel culture is a good thing:

- 45% of people from more affluent areas agreed vs 38% from less affluent areas
- 60% of non-binary individuals agreed vs 30% who disagreed
- Older Gen Z (aged 20-25) agreed vs younger Gen Zers (aged 16 to 19)

This fear of getting cancelled is having an impact on the kind of content young people are creating.

"It's often easier to just agree with what everyone around you thinks to reduce the risk of being cancelled."

But cancel culture is a double-edged sword. Respondents agreed that individuals need to be held accountable for serious wrong actions. However more minor actions or genuine mistakes do not always warrant the same outcomes.
Do young people see cancel culture as a force for good? Or a threat to free speech? Here’s what they had to say about it:

**For**

- Gives a voice to the voiceless
- Makes people think twice before posting
- People are held accountable for their ‘wrongdoings’
- Gives ‘political’ autonomy to the viewers/citizens

**Against**

- Everyone should have a chance of redemption
- Who is being cancelled? Will they be able to educate themselves?
- Affects free speech: The fear that going against the grain could get you cancelled

**Neither for or against**

- We all have to learn how to use social media responsibly
- Some people deserve to be cancelled, others may have suffered wrongly
- There’s a fine balance between being cancelled for something minor and being held accountable for something more serious
Living in a virtual world means we’re always connected. But it also puts us at risk of digital overload. The idea of taking a break from digital devices is becoming increasingly popular.
Digital Detoxing

@shkrabaanthony
We all face challenges online. Whether you’re Gen Z or a baby boomer, sometimes the only solution is to remove yourself completely. But when you’re a Gen Z content creator, taking a break from devices might not sound that appealing.

According to our Gen Z respondents, the main challenges they face when spending time online include:

- **Equality and diversity (TikTok censoring)**
- **Accessibility (for disabled users)**
- **Fake news**
- **Debates around free vs hate speech**
- **Beating the algorithm**

There’s also “the pressure to make everything you post look perfect.” As one Young Person explains: “Photos, videos and captions all need to be meticulously edited. It’s so draining.”

And let’s not forget the algorithms. “The pressure to beat the Instagram algorithm has discouraged me from creating and posting my art. If no one’s going to see it, then what’s the point?”
The pressure to understand social media etiquette, to convey perfection and a constant search for validation is impacting young people's behaviour and feelings more than we sometimes realise.

Of course, the biggest challenge for Gen Z has to be the amount of time spent on social media. This is a generation who has grown up with the internet, so turning to a screen for information/comfort/validation comes as second nature.

So how do young people avoid getting sucked into their social feeds, consuming hours of (often pointless) content? They can unfollow people, turn off their notifications, set a timer, or use social platforms primarily to improve, grow and develop. But that can all be easier said than done.

Young people are more conscious about the impact of social media – perhaps more than we give them credit for.

According to our Take the Temperature report, young people were especially aware of this during lockdown. It was a vicious circle. The more time they spent on their screens meant the more pressure and anxiety they felt. But here’s the Catch-22: without those screens they struggled to stay connected with their friends, family and support networks.

We might not be able to answer the question: how much is too much time? But we can tell you how aware Gen Z is to the issue. 65% of our respondents said they spent too much time on social media. Just 13% didn’t agree.

Non-binary individuals and females spend the most time on social media, followed by males (80%, 69%, and 58%, respectively).

But while there is a collective recognition of time spent on screens, what are young people doing about it? According to our survey, 40% do not monitor their screen time, while 33% do (27% neither agree nor disagree).

Those from less affluent areas were 10% less likely to monitor screen time compared to those not from a more affluent area (48% vs 38%). While females were 10% less likely than males to employ monitoring tools or techniques (44% vs 33%).
Half of the 16-18 age group said they did not monitor screen time usage.

The link between too much screen time and our mental health is well documented. You know it. We know it. And Gen Z knows it. They recognise that minimising time spent on social media can benefit mental wellbeing and productivity. They have even taken steps to reduce the time spent on socials. But the general consensus is that these efforts largely fall by the wayside – leaving them feeling worse because they failed to take positive action.

The survey results also call into question just how effective digital detox tools might be. Of the respondents who do monitor their screen time, 74% also reported spending a lot of time on social media. Of those who didn’t monitor their screen time, 67% reported spending a lot of time on social media.

But the key message from our research is that because Gen Z use social media as a form of escapism, relaxation, education, or financial gain, the idea of limiting screen time doesn’t even occur to them. In fact, limitations would only be a consideration if they were experiencing headaches or difficulty sleeping, which negatively impacted on their work or study commitments.

So how likely are Gen Zers to consider a digital detox? According to our survey, an impressive 92% would for the following reasons:

- **40%** Spend more time doing things I enjoy more.
- **36%** Get away from unrealistic expectations.
- **31%** Avoid negative news.
- **26%** Feel less pressure about staying in touch with people.
- **21%** Avoid hate speech, bullying and trolling.
- **17%** Spend less money.

The key trend is that because Gen Z use social media as a form of escapism, relaxation, education, or financial gain, the idea of limiting screen time doesn’t even occur to them. In fact, limitations would only be a consideration if they were experiencing headaches or difficulty sleeping, which negatively impacted on their work or study commitments.
Whether they have already tried a digital detox or have only thought about it, Gen Z are fully aware of the benefits it would bring.

**MENTAL HEALTH AND ANXIETY:** The more addicted young people feel to social media, the more stressed they feel.

**AVOID BURNOUT:** The ongoing pressure to respond or feeling overwhelmed by the content they are exposed to can quickly lead to burnout.

**FEWER DISTRACTIONS:** Young people would much prefer to focus on other areas and goals in life that don’t involve social media.

48% of young people from less affluent areas said they would take digital detox in order to spend more time doing what they enjoy (37% from more affluent areas). 43% would do the same as a way to escape unrealistic expectations (33% from more affluent areas).

As one young person put it: “Having to interact with lots of people, even virtually, can be exhausting.” Is it time to hit the escape button?
As with so many things in modern life, social media has its benefits. And its drawbacks. But does that make young people want to get rid of it all together?

According to our survey, the majority would. 40% of young people would prefer to live in a world without social media, while 30% would be reluctant to get rid of it completely. 30% neither agree or disagree.

Looking at the positives, social media provides a platform to connect, share, make money and learn, both personally and professionally. It also gives Gen Z a voice and the chance to feel represented.

But it’s not all rainbows and unicorns.

We are aware of social media’s darker side – promoting unrealistic expectations, putting pressure on users to churn out content, and discouraging users from being authentic (in their bid to beat the algorithm). Users also have to stay informed (sifting through huge volumes of information to do so), stay engaged (showing passion and commitment to a cause), and remain alert to misinformation.
As any Gen Z will tell you, this is no mean feat. And then there’s the not insignificant link between social media and mental health. When asked what social means to them, the answers ranged from the positive (community) to the negative (bullying).
Here’s what our group of young people believe would make social media a better place to hang out:

Users and creators need to work collaboratively to make social media a safe place for everyone.

“It’s our responsibility as a collective to not be hateful, spread respect, and report hateful posts when we see them.”

Caution is needed as we transition into the metaverse (and other tech advances). We need to ensure we maintain sufficient personal control and freedom of choice.

“The fact that Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates etc. send their kids to schools with minimal technology and don’t let them use social media is really telling.”

Young people want to feel safer online. This can be achieved through regulation of content (e.g. online bullying, fake news) and opportunities for healthy debate and open discourse.

“We need open discourse; a chance to hear both sides of the conversation. If we disagree, we move on. And if it’s pushing boundaries, we report it.”
We already knew it, and lockdown confirmed it: Gen Z and social media are virtually synonymous. Social content is everything this generation could hope for – escapism, relaxation, education, and financial gain. But it can also contain a whole lot of misinformation.

The algorithms designed to curate the content in our feeds are no match for this negativity. And the dopamine rush makes it hard for young people to switch off.

But our research shows that Gen Z recognises there are two sides of the coin. As digital citizens, they strive to make positive contributions online; from social media activism to digital detoxing, they know what’s right and what’s wrong with this virtual world.
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