

ARCHEWELL
FOUNDATION

Insight Report

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Special Thanks

The Archewell Foundation is deeply grateful for the exceptional partners and young participants who make these Insight Sessions possible. Through their support and collaboration, we were able to conduct honest, thoughtful conversations with incredible young people around the world, ensuring that every voice is heard and respected. We are deeply appreciative of their continued commitment to advancing youth mental health and digital well-being, and we hope these insights will help create meaningful impact within their organizations and beyond.

We are honored to partner with the following groups for this report: Self-Injury Recovery & Awareness (SIRA), The Marcy Lab School, Young Change Agents,

Kids Help Phone, Fundación Espacio Creativo, Plan International Youth Advisory Board, HERCampus, Generation Patient, Batyr, the Young Women's Christian Association of Vancouver, and the Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council. We thank them for their commitment to elevating youth voices.

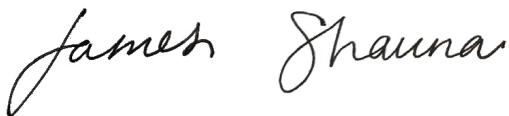
Lastly, The Archewell Foundation thanks all those working globally to create a safer, more inclusive online world. We hope this report contributes meaningfully to those efforts today and in the future. To learn more about our partners and their work, or about how to partner with The Archewell Foundation, please visit archewell.org.

Preface

At The Archewell Foundation, “show up, do good” is more than just a tagline: it’s the guiding principle that shapes our focus on mental health and collective well-being.

We believe that in order to do the most good, we must first commit to showing up and listening to the voices and communities we seek to impact. Over the last three years, *The Archewell Foundation Insight Report* has embodied these values, allowing us to design solutions and interventions rooted in learnings from conversations with hundreds of parents and young people around the world.

This year’s report serves as a warning: the pace of technological change over the last year has been staggering, and young people are more overwhelmed than ever trying to navigate the online world in the age of AI, often without real or authentic leaders to help guide them. They demand better and safer platforms, protections against threats of deepfakes and manipulated content, and education to help use AI responsibly. We are in a pivotal moment, and the choices we make today will shape how the next generation grows, learns, and leads in the digital age. It is imperative to listen, but even more essential to act.



JAMES HOLT AND SHAUNA NEP
CO EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS, THE ARCHEWELL FOUNDATION

The Archewell Foundation is *committed* to showing up for young people by continuing to *amplify* their voices and ensuring their lived experiences inform the way we use and develop technology *responsibly*.

Together with our partners, we will continue to champion solutions that safeguard youth mental health, restore trust in information, and create online spaces where young people can thrive.

We are honored to share these findings with you and grateful to the young people whose wisdom and courage continue to guide the way forward.





About The *Insight* Sessions

Now in its third year, *The Archewell Foundation Insight Report* is a compilation of stories, experiences, and learnings from conversations with young people and parents around the world about what it means to grow up in the digital age.

The findings from these structured yet open conversations provide the cornerstone of The Archewell Foundation's yearly strategic priorities and programming, guiding our efforts to create safer, more responsible online spaces in service of a better future for all young people. As society considers how to approach advances in AI technology, ongoing listening and dialogue will be our most powerful tools for ensuring all of humanity thrives in the years ahead.

This year, we conducted 15 listening sessions with 106 participants^[1] aged 10 to 25 from Australia, Canada, Panama, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Sessions were conducted both in-person and virtually in English and Spanish, and were designed for open-ended listening, ensuring that young people could speak freely about their experiences and aspirations.

As we learned in previous years, prioritizing a diversity of perspectives highlights both the universal experiences young people face in the digital age, as well as the unique challenges shaped by cultural and geographic contexts. By amplifying these diverse voices, we aim to build a more comprehensive understanding of how technology shapes youth experiences today.

This approach surfaces lived realities while also generating actionable ideas that shape The Archewell Foundation's programming, advocacy, and partnerships. For example, this year's focus on leadership and the rapidly evolving AI-driven tech landscape grew directly out of findings from our Insight Sessions. Additionally, our continued commitment to the Responsible Tech Youth Power Fund reflects what we hear in sessions: that young leaders must have a voice in technology decision-making, as they often perceive both its benefits and risks more intuitively than adults.

Maintaining dialogue with a wide range of young people who are at the forefront of the digital experience is integral to this work. This year, we spoke with young people who are studying digital literacy and innovation, designing entrepreneurial solutions to community challenges, training for high-demand careers outside of traditional higher education, building peer-support networks for those living with chronic conditions, leading global advocacy efforts, producing media for their peers, and developing creative outlets and mental health resources to support youth well-being.

OUR CONVERSATIONS ARE ALWAYS CENTERED ON TWO KEY QUESTIONS:

How do young people experience social media and technology today?

What changes would they like to see to build a better online world?

As we learned over the past two years, young people continue to have complicated and often paradoxical relationships with social media. While it is a tool for connection and community, it also fosters dependency, comparison, and overuse. Additionally, as families grapple with the good and bad of the online world and new technologies arrive at seemingly warp speed, we wanted to know:

- HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE DEFINE LEADERSHIP IN THE DIGITAL AGE?
- WHO DO THEY TRUST?
- WHAT QUALITIES DO THEY BELIEVE WILL SHAPE RESPONSIBLE LEADERSHIP IN THE FUTURE?
- WHAT DO THEY WANT ADULTS, EDUCATORS, POLICYMAKERS, AND TECH LEADERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE DEVELOPING AI TOOLS, TO KNOW ABOUT THE YOUTH EXPERIENCE?
- WHAT IS IT LIKE GROWING UP IN THE AGE OF AI?
- HOW ARE YOUNG PEOPLE ADAPTING TO A WORLD WITH AI?
- WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CONCERNS?

While these findings are not representative of all young people, taken together over three years they provide a growing body of qualitative insights that capture the complexity, challenges, and promise of growing up in a rapidly evolving digital world. This report is for anyone seeking to understand the lived experience of young people in the digital and AI age, as well as those who want to know exactly what changes young people want to see in order to create safer and more responsible online spaces.

^[1] In early 2025, we also conducted two sessions with a total of 12 parents. The insights from these sessions, combined with what we've heard from parents in the past, highlighted the importance of prioritizing young voices. We made the decision to focus solely on the youth perspective for this report.

An Evolving Tech Landscape

Since our inaugural reporting in 2023, the intersection of society and technology has continued to evolve.

Technology remains woven into our daily lives, and awareness of the dangers for youth has grown thanks to the work of advocacy groups, researchers, lawmakers, and parents. Whistleblowers, parent testimonials, and widely read books have made clear what our insight sessions have long shown: the way young people interact with the online world is not without danger, and addressing these challenges requires collective action.

While there is still more to do, many countries have started to implement changes. Countries like Australia, South Korea, France, Italy, Brazil, Greece, Belgium, Cambodia, Egypt, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Russia, and parts of the United States and China are now limiting or banning phone use in schools.

In Europe, both the EU and UK are working to implement new laws aimed at improving the relationship between technology and society. And in 2024, Australia became the first country to pass a nationwide ban on social media use for those under 16.

Despite this momentum, advances in AI are adding new layers of complexity. Tools such as chatbots, virtual reality, and large language models are transforming how we live, but also bring serious risks. Alarming reports describe chatbots engaging in inappropriate conversations with children, while whistleblowers claim that industry leaders intentionally suppressed evidence of exploitative interactions with teens. Together, these revelations highlight how quickly innovation can outpace safeguards.

In the U.S., progress exists but remains piecemeal. There is still no national policy on phone use in schools, but New York is moving forward with a statewide ban guided by a Teen Advisory Council that places youth voices at the center of implementation. Meanwhile, at least 20 states have advanced legislation on consumer data privacy, algorithmic discrimination, and AI oversight. Federally, the Take It Down Act passed in early 2025, criminalizing the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, including AI-generated deepfakes, and requiring their removal within 48 hours of a victim's request. That same year, young people and parents rallied against an AI moratorium that would have silenced state-level reforms for 10 years, successfully stopping the proposal before it became law.

Once again, we're at a critical intersection related to our use of technology. AI has the power to supercharge

learning, accessibility, and creativity if used correctly. Yet without proper safeguards it can put children and teens at risk.

Despite an evolving landscape, one refrain remains constant over the last three years: young people feel both empowered and overwhelmed. They want to see leadership, from their peers and the adults in their lives, that actually addresses the challenges of today and those of their futures. And they demand to not only be part of the conversation, but to be leaders of progress as well.

This year's sessions were designed to explore this dynamic further. What is needed now is a shift away from narrowly reacting to individual harms toward holistic approaches that address the root causes of an online world that too often works against young people's well-being.



FINDINGS

GROWING UP IN THE DIGITAL AGE—

“It’s Positive But Also, *A Lot.*”



Growing Up In The Digital Age

Three out of four young people we spoke to said that technology plays a positive role in their lives, shaping how they learn, connect, and navigate daily life.

“Growing up in the digital age has its advantages,” says a Canadian participant. “Whether it’s socializing with friends, academics or work, [technology] has made my life more efficient in so many ways. Without technology, I don’t know how I’d get many things done in the day.”

Yet, when asked to describe what it feels like to grow up in the digital age, participants reached for words like “overwhelming,” “confusing,” and “overstimulating.” This paradox—technology as both a connector and source of anxiety—echoes what we have heard in the past, and continues to define much of the youth experience online.

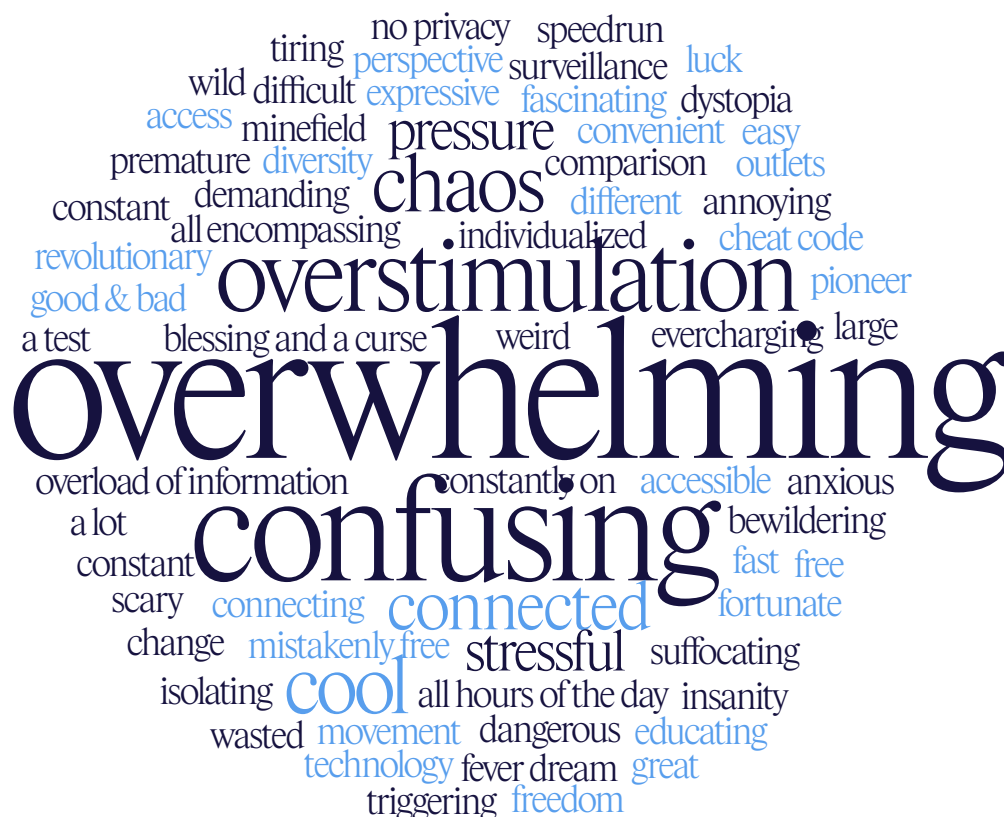
For many, the introduction of AI—while exciting and useful—adds a new layer of complexity to an already overwhelming digital environment, making it even

more difficult to identify what is real. As one U.S. participant explained, “There’s so much stuff that’s being pushed on you that you don’t know what’s true and what’s not... for most generations, information was set in stone, and now we live in a landscape where we have to second guess everything constantly.”

Despite this sentiment, young people say the solution is not to abandon social media or ban AI. Instead, they want to see leaders step up and recognize how difficult it is to manage life in this environment. More than anything, they are asking for tools and guidance to help them not only cope with the realities of digital life, but also shape it into something healthier, safer, and more manageable.

This shows up in two ways: leadership training that harnesses their natural digital fluency for the decisions ahead and tech tools that make it easier to manage the harmful side of being online.

GROWING UP IN THE DIGITAL AGE FEELS...





Defining Leadership In The Digital Age

Participants describe leadership in the digital age in different, often contradictory, ways. For example, some say leadership feels “accessible” while others feel it is “unknown” or “secretive.” Some participants feel leadership in the digital age is purely “performative,” while others feel it is “influential.”

Much of this variation stems from their tendency to initially equate leadership in the digital age with tech giants like Meta and Apple, or high-profile figures such as Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk, who often generate negative reactions.

Yet when asked to identify leaders of their own generation, these tech figures quickly lose relevance and many participants struggle to name meaningful alternatives. As one Australian participant admitted, “It’s funny how that question draws a blank in my mind...because there are so many leaders... it’s overwhelming. There’s many names but also no names that are coming to my brain.”

This uncertainty reflects a broader reality: a digital landscape saturated with competing voices, often driven by profit, that makes it difficult for young people to discern who is truly credible. In this environment, meaningful voices are often drowned out by harmful or shallow content, creating a leadership vacuum that leaves young people disoriented about who to trust online.

We often hear adults mistakenly assume influencers fill this leadership vacuum, but young people strongly disagree. Across geographies, youth describe influencers as “performative,” “inauthentic,” and “profit-motivated.” By this definition, influencers may have a role as messengers, but are not seen as credible leaders of their generation. A participant in the U.S. encapsulates this sentiment by saying, “I think all leaders are influencers now, but not all influencers are leaders.”

This captures an important nuance: the term “influencer” casts a wide net. For a majority of the young people we spoke to, their associations are largely negative, but there is some recognition that there can be exceptions. For example in Canada, a young person says, “A lot of influencers are leaders, even if they’re not necessarily good ones, because so many people follow them and look up to them...We associate a lot of negative connotations to [influencers], and some of them can be really good leaders, but all of them do have a role to play in informing and inspiring the next generation, whether it’s necessarily in a good way or not.”

Young people say influencers need to meet a certain criteria for them to see them as “good” leaders including: authenticity, commitment to a cause, accessibility, honesty, and independence from financial motives. Across Spanish and English-speaking groups alike, four consistent themes emerge in how youth define leadership in the digital age:

1. TRUE LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT AUTHENTICITY AND CREDIBILITY

In an online world flooded with “fake” personas and curated perfection, authenticity is the gold standard for true leadership. And if authenticity is a prerequisite for true leadership, many social media influencers and tech leaders don’t make the cut, even if they have hundreds of thousands or even millions of followers.

In Australia, a participant explains, “Influencers aren’t taken as seriously as leaders. I couldn’t be influenced by an influencer who does brand deals...about something important. It would take more than that for me from someone a lot more powerful, who I actually believe has the authority and...skill set to be talking about it.”

Young people see real leadership as requiring honesty about one’s life and struggles, rather than promoting unrealistic standards. This ethos of ethical influence and using one’s digital voice to spread knowledge, empathy, and positivity was echoed by many as defining traits of true leadership. In Canada, a young person noted, “Influencers can serve as entertainment, but I think it’s important to really evaluate if you use them as role models [because] they aren’t relatable.”

2. TRUE LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT MONEY OR FOLLOWERS

Youth believe true digital leaders are those who use their platforms authentically and with the right intentions. However, the term “influencer” is seen as innately profit-motivated.

For example, in Panama, a young person remarked, “Influencers focus more on marketing to sell you something and the end game is to make money and to get views, because that’s how they win. But we win absolutely nothing.”

These digital natives are quick to spot when someone has “sold out” their platform and audience for financial gain. As an American participant says, “We see it time and time again that someone who started quite authentic and really true to their own views and values all of a sudden is open to the highest bidder.”

That said, some young people recognize that not all influencers fall into the profit-motivated stereotype. Influencers can also be activists, politicians, entertainers, or community leaders. The distinction, then, is “...the motive and intention behind what they’re posting. If it’s a good motive and intention, and it helps the people around them to influence positively. It’s not about the money for a digital role model.”

Young people want to see influencers who stand up for causes they believe in. In the U.S., a participant says leaders are “the people fighting for the right and good things, not just the people doing things because others are telling them to, they’re doing it because they care and because they want to.”

While mainstream culture equates leadership with reach, youth argue that leadership can exist without large followings in local communities, in advocacy spaces, and in online forums where integrity matters more than numbers. In fact, we hear young people say they often trust accounts with smaller followings more than larger ones because that signals greater accountability to their followers and closer connection with their community.

For example, a participant in the U.S. shared, “I like to watch people that have [fewer] subscribers versus a lot, because... I feel like they start off so real and authentic, and then after... I personally notice some changes, and it just makes me want to stay away.”

Young people strongly reject the idea that decision-makers should use follower count as a reflection of influence. A Canadian participant notes, “If they were the ones making decisions for young people, I just feel like it would be so misrepresented because they don’t represent the average experience of a young person. As much as they want to create content for us, just like how movies aren’t real life, neither is their content.”

3. TRUE LEADERS TAKE ACTION AND SHOW IMPACT

Instead of follower count, criteria for identifying true leadership should focus on tangible impact and real-world action. This generation wants to see leaders who are proactive not just online but in the real world. For example, they want to see leaders who push for practical digital literacy skills and AI best practices.

Young people recognize that impact can happen at all levels. A Canadian participant remarked, “Not everyone feels that the work that they do need to be backed by massive outreach on social media. A lot of things can happen within communities, within conversations, I guess [there are] levels of change and levels of reach and different areas.”

Participants with more sophisticated levels of digital literacy are understandably less trusting and more cautious about what they see and hear online, especially as many accounts and influencers are perceived as motivated by profit and status rather than having genuine care for communities. They are concerned about younger generations who lack this understanding and want to see more leaders speak up, educate, and push for more tools and transparency on platforms that can help users identify monetized accounts and AI-generated content.

4. TRUE LEADERSHIP OFTEN STARTS OFFLINE

Across most groups, young people say they are more likely to trust those closest to them when seeking advice on more important and personal issues—people like their parents, educators, and community leaders whom they engage with most often and who are less likely to have an online presence. A participant in the U.S. says, “I don’t Google what to do in New York City. I go on TikTok because I know they’ll have better suggestions. But if it’s like, ‘what do I do if my boyfriend breaks up with me,’ then I’ll go to more in person role models.”

“Not only are they more genuine,” adds a young person in Canada “...but I feel like I could trust them more.... it is just so true how curated social media is, and we really don’t see what goes on behind the scenes beyond like the 30-second Reel.”

In the U.S., a participant explains, “We think about social media influencers, but without social media we wouldn’t know who they are. Leaders can make their cause known without using social media. They don’t have to get your attention with a 30-second TikTok or by hate watching them.”

These figures are seen as more authentic precisely because their advice is rooted in lived experience and not shaped by the pressures of online performance. Young people want adults to know that trust is often stronger in the classroom or around the dinner table than on Instagram or TikTok, even if much of life plays out on those platforms.

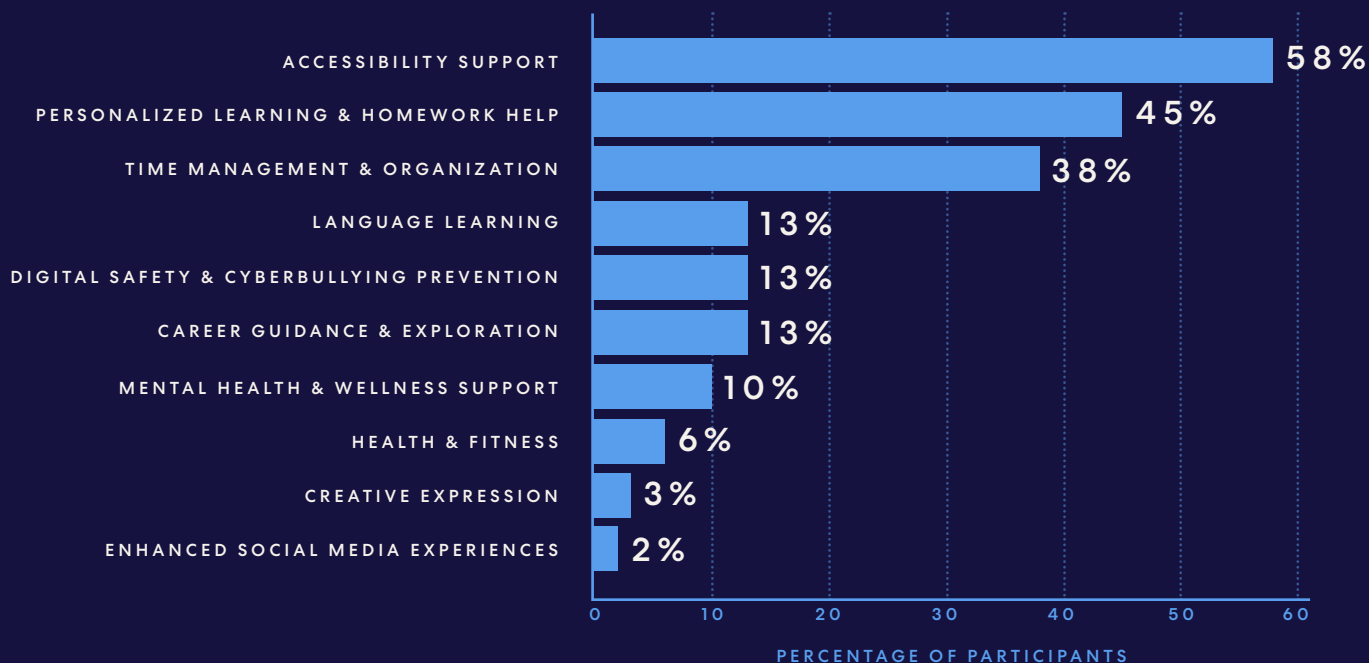
A U.S. participant shared, “Whenever I am saying ‘someone wise once said,’ it’s never someone I watched online, it’s always someone I had a conversation with in person... These conversations I have with people in person remain in my memory much more because of smell and touch...I’m very immersed in the moment, and I love being in person with people, and that’s not something that I can never compare with online.”



“I feel like I’m the guinea pig. I don’t know how my brain is going to *develop* using AI... Am I just gonna forget how to write emails? It hasn’t happened, but I don’t know. Is it gonna happen?”

YOUNG PERSON IN CANADA

Top Two Positives of AI



Growing Up In The Age of AI

When young people talk about artificial intelligence, they do so with a mix of curiosity, pragmatism, and caution. Those in their early teens often describe AI in terms of limitless possibilities, a tool to help them learn, create, and organize their lives. Older participants, particularly those over 18, speak with more restraint, raising alarms about the need for more oversight and guardrails to protect younger generations from potential harm.

Across all groups and ages, however, common themes emerged about how youth experience AI and what they want older generations to understand.

AI IS A TOOL, NOT A REPLACEMENT

A consistent theme across English and Spanish language groups is that older generations often underestimate how much AI is already part of a young person's daily life. From homework help to creative projects to simple task management, it's not a matter of "if" young people are using AI, it's a matter of "how." AI usage across groups is universal.

"I could not think of anyone who would start an assignment without checking their idea on ChatGPT or asking ChatGPT for ideas," says a participant in Australia. "It's absolutely non-negotiable that people are using it, and I feel like that needs to be acknowledged more, instead of trying to suppress that."

When asked to select the two most positive uses of AI from a list, nearly half (45%) chose "personalized learning and homework help," reflecting the value of using AI as a personal tutor to help explain difficult concepts. A teen in Australia explained how ChatGPT helps customize explanations: "When you have one teacher in a classroom, they explain things in a very specific way. I like that you can ask ChatGPT to simplify it or change the tone. It can be very personalized." Others pointed to the accessibility it provides, especially for students who cannot afford a personalized tutor: "It's literally free in most instances... it helps level the playing field a little bit."

Young people are quick to clarify, however, that they see AI as a tool to extend thinking, not a substitute for it. These young people want adults to know that they are often experimenting responsibly, not surrendering entirely to automation (though they fear their peers might be).

Additionally, 58% chose "accessibility support" as a top positive use of AI, praising features such as speech-to-text tools that expand participation for teens with disabilities. This was especially relevant for young participants with chronic illness or disabilities, who say AI tools have been instrumental in helping organize tasks, seek out medical information, or simplify tasks like writing emails.

Fears of Overdependence

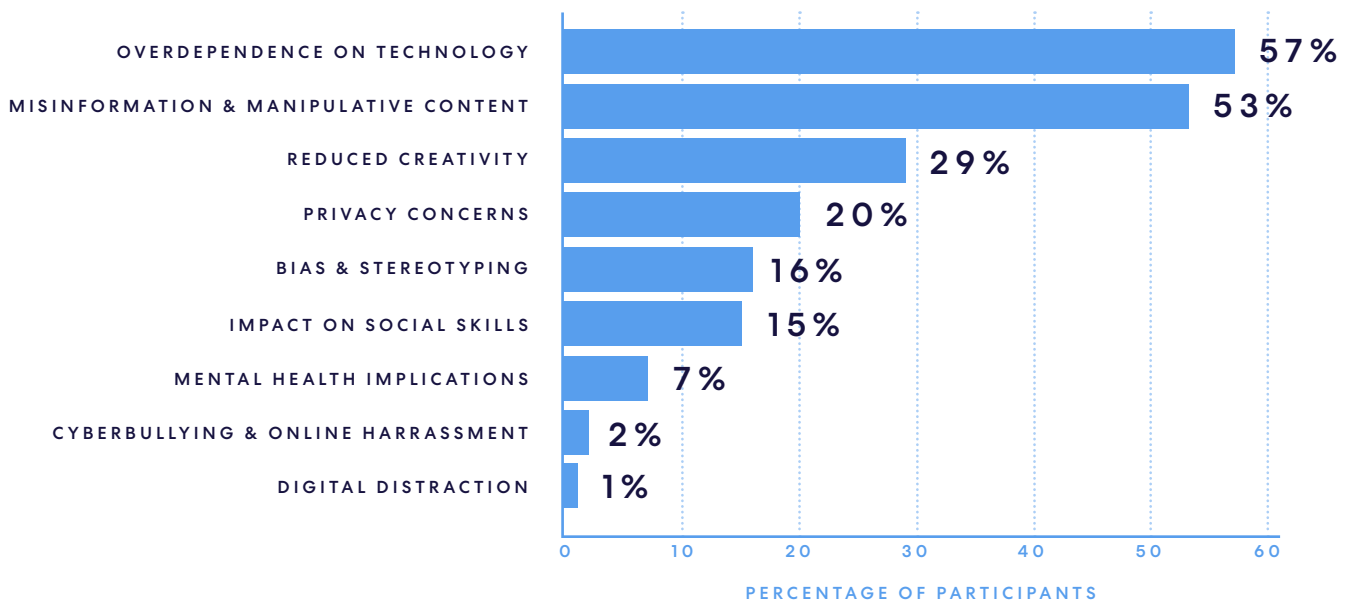
Despite embracing AI as an essential tool, concerns about becoming overly reliant on AI emerged unprompted in nearly every discussion and was selected as the top concern for 57% of young people we spoke to.

A common refrain among older participants (those in college or in entry-level jobs) is relief that they didn't have access to AI while in school which allowed them to build key critical thinking and problem-solving skills. They worry that younger generations growing up with AI will be stripped of those opportunities and express concern about what this means for the future of humanity.

"A lot of young people are straight up [asking AI to] just write and submit that information," says a participant in Canada. "The impact isn't just a penalty on a school assignment. That's impacting the learner and their ability to do things themselves."

Younger participants, those still in middle or high school, want adults to know that they share these concerns and are not naive about the risks. They understand AI usage can become a slippery slope, but they also don't feel that they have the proper systems in place at school to learn how to use AI responsibly.

Top Two Concerns About AI



Fears Around Manipulated Content & Inaccurate Information

Nearly as pressing as overdependence is the fear of manipulated content. More than half (53%) of young people say the potential for more sophisticated misinformation and manipulated content is a top concern, especially in an already messy digital ecosystem.

Youth, especially young women, described deepfakes as “terrifying” and “the scariest thing ever.” They worry about how quickly and easily AI-generated images and videos can be weaponized in personal or political contexts. “If someone had a vendetta against you, they could easily make a picture of you... and post it. It’s just so scary that people can use it against each other,” says a young woman in Australia.

Some participants also noted the rise of “AI slop”—low-quality, nonsensical AI-generated content saturating platforms like TikTok and YouTube that often slips past moderation filters. At best, it degrades the online experience; at worst, it increases the risk of exposing children and teens to harmful or inappropriate content.

This is not just a personal concern but a systemic one: participants said AI threatens to corrode trust in news, politics, and public life. “It’s going to complicate everything,” says a young person in Australia.

These youth want adults to know they are already exhausted by having to constantly navigate questions of trust: what’s real, what’s manipulated, and how to tell the difference. They want tech leaders to proactively—not reactively—develop tools to help identify AI-generated content and build in safeguards to help them navigate an environment where truth feels fragile. They need trusted voices like parents and educators to provide resources for responsible usage and to build necessary critical thinking skills.

“AI has a big impact on real world events. It can be so dangerous, especially when there’s young people using it and their brains aren’t fully developed and they can’t tell what’s real and what’s not.”

YOUNG PERSON IN AUSTRALIA

PROJECT

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Note On AI and Mental Health Support

One area where views were more divided was AI's role in providing mental health support. Some participants reference personally using or knowing someone who has used open-source platforms like ChatGPT as a quick, accessible, nonjudgmental, and free tool to discuss their feelings. In Australia, a young participant explained how she tested this feature: "I created this random role play with this random character, and it acted like a therapist and helped you with grounding tools, a safety plan without you even asking it to... it can help you sometimes better than a therapist."

Others, however, raised sharp concerns about the consequences of replacing trained human professionals with AI, especially for young users, citing reports of chatbots reinforcing harmful behaviors or providing problematic advice. "It's not a mentor or therapist," says a participant in Australia. "It's a tool. It doesn't really have any emotions. It's not like someone you can vent to. It's not a friend... You can use it to help you with math homework, but try not to trust it with your feelings and your actual human stuff."

Another Australian participant says, "As a psychologist and a young person, that is a massive concern for me. When I have clients come into my room and say, 'ChatGPT said I should do this'...that really concerns me...It's not always a safe space. It does often perpetuate further harm. It's not based in research. ChatGPT has never had any of the feelings you've ever felt as a young person."

There is also a fear that tech companies will begin to divert resources away from in-person services and more towards virtual AI systems. As a Canadian participant says, "If these systems and tech companies encourage that and put money into that, instead of putting money into training and actual peer support, then where do we end up?"

Again, we see how the importance of education on proper and safe AI usage can help young people be more critical about the way they use and engage with these tools. For example, a participant in Australia

recalls, "We had this presentation a while back about being safe on the Internet, and we had this story about a kid who was...really depressed and asked ChatGPT 'should I kill myself?' And ChatGPT actually said yes. And he did end up doing it. Because ChatGPT's whole function is to agree with you."

Regardless of whether adults approve or not, the reality is young people are turning to AI for mental health support, and tech companies have a responsibility to build in proper measures to ensure the information they can access is appropriate and safe.

Growing Up In The Age of Social Media

As we heard in 2023 and 2024, young people continue to have deeply mixed views about social media. Participants acknowledge social media can inspire "connection," "community," and "engagement" while in the same breath describing it as "draining," "fake," and "toxic."

For example, a participant in Canada believes "It has given me so many opportunities to learn new things, express myself, and connect with people I wouldn't have met otherwise," whereas a participant from Australia says: "It helps you connect with people, but it also takes you away from real life... It starts making the time you have with people in real life less and less and you're just talking to people online you don't even know."

Building off the findings from prior years, these sessions revealed new themes regarding social media usage among young people, including:

A GROWING NOSTALGIA FOR THE EARLY DAYS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In these sessions, particularly among those 18 to 24 who remember the early days of platforms like Instagram and Facebook, we hear participants talk more about the decline of the social media experience. These participants fondly reflect on the early days of Instagram and Facebook when platforms seemed to put authentic connection over profits. In Australia, a young person recalls the early days of Instagram:

“I think we grew up in a world that was very positive in the beginning. Instagram was made to connect people...but it’s doing too much now...social media is not connecting people, rather just kind of creating really unrealistic standards.”

For many, apps like Instagram and TikTok have strayed from their core purpose and instead turned into money grabs, prioritizing influencer culture, consumerism and comparison that young people dislike but cannot control.

Participants 18 to 24 long for the social media platforms they joined years ago, which had simple interfaces, no paid ads or sponsored content, limits on scrolling, no suggested content, no beauty filters or AI generated content, and more control over who you see and follow.

When asked whether they would recommend aliens introduce social media platforms back to their planet, nearly half (47%) of participants said yes, with the caveat that they design them as they were initially intended, rather than taking the versions that exist today.

YOUNG PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO DISCONNECT—AND FAILING

When asked what comes to mind when they think of “screen time,” participants respond with words like “addicting,” “too much,” “uncontrollable,” “draining,” and “excessive.” This is largely a universal experience—participants in every country indicate struggling to disconnect from social media, and reflect on what is lost in the hours spent on social media. “You could have been doing uni work or other work, or going out, going to the gym or whatever. It’s the opportunity cost of sitting there on your screen instead of actually doing something helpful for your life,” explains a participant in Australia.

In Canada, a participant says, “I honestly think life would be a lot simpler without specific social media. I think we can all say that we feel so guilty every time we scroll on TikTok or Instagram Reels for four hours during the day, like that is not what anyone should be doing, but it’s actually what everyone does. It’s definitely not a healthy thing.”

“A lot of social media apps started with the intention to connect or to share pictures... [but now] *companies are more profit motivated* than they are focused on the original intent of their app... They prioritize that profit over the user’s well being because through the time that people spend on these apps, they’re sacrificing their own mental well being...and they start using things like likes and comments as a way for external validation, and I think that takes *a real toll on your mental health.*”

YOUNG PERSON IN CANADA

“It’s sad because it does control us. It’s very, *very addictive*. It keeps you hooked... and I use it to avoid stuff which is not good. It’s not used with intentionality, which is made harder by the company’s active efforts to reduce intentionality and keep you on it more. So it’s like we’re fighting the system and our wiring.”

YOUNG PERSON IN THE U.S.

As we heard in both 2023 and 2024, young people mostly blame themselves for their lack of willpower or self control, despite understanding that these apps are intentionally designed to be addictive. In Australia, a young person says, “I feel like social media definitely affected my self-discipline. I tell myself ‘I’ll just stay five minutes’ and then I’ll go do whatever I was going to do. But... I just keep scrolling.”

Another Australian added, “You just feel pretty disappointed and like a bit of a degenerate...you just feel like, ‘What am I doing with my life?’”

The young people we spoke to are hyper aware of the negative impact of too much social media, and want solutions to regain control over their screen time. Some users mention setting time limits through their phone; others download third-party apps like Opal to help keep them accountable. Others delete apps entirely. Despite these efforts, young people say these tactics are usually short-lived.

When asked if they could leave social media entirely, many say they want to but keep coming back because it is an essential way to communicate with friends and family, and they fear missing out. A young person from the U.S. says, “A big struggle I have with Instagram is I really want to delete it, and I find periods where I do delete it. But the problem is...there are too many people that I can only message on Instagram, and it makes it really difficult to delete it.”

“I use
[social media]
like a pacifier,
it’s like an
escape.”

YOUNG PERSON IN PANAMA



The Way Forward

At the end of each session, participants were asked to write a letter to tech leaders and developers of AI telling them what they should consider when designing their technology.

1.

PRIORITIZE USER SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

Participants overwhelmingly emphasized the need to keep online spaces safe and supportive. They urged tech leaders to protect vulnerable users from harassment, hate, and misinformation. One young person in the U.S. reminded creators that real people suffer the consequences of harmful content: “Please remember the people behind the screens who will get the hateful comments... Please remember the people who will see the misinformation and be hurt by that.”

Another teen in the U.S. pointed to emerging threats like deepfakes, warning, “AI deepfake nudes are ruining the lives of so many girls across the world. Please think of your daughters and sisters when designing [these weapons]!”

There is a clear plea for empathy over profit: “Remember we are all humans at the end of the day... Please find a way to make the internet safer and less scary.”

2.

DESIGN FOR INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

Young respondents want technology designed to include and benefit everyone. They ask developers to be inclusive and mindful of biases, ensuring AI and online spaces do not exclude certain groups. “Hey, could you be inclusive and careful when creating new online spaces and AI? ... We’re not 100% sure of the impact it could have on younger generations or the implications of biases on those not included,” one U.S. participant wrote.

A Canadian participant called for using “real representative data” in AI systems and involving “diverse perspectives in the design process so that technology is inclusive and accessible.” This means considering people of different ages, backgrounds, and abilities in design decisions.

3.

COMMIT TO ETHICAL AND TRANSPARENT PRACTICES

Many participants stressed that tech leaders must act ethically and take responsibility for their tools. They highlighted how easily people can be misled, urging companies to focus on honesty and accountability. “I’d like them to consider how easily influenced people can be and focus on ethics,” one youth in the U.S. wrote.

Transparency is another common demand: young people want to know how AI is being used and to see companies acknowledge uncertainty or limitations. A participant in Panama simply asked, “Can you correct the misinformation you generate?” underscoring the need for truthfulness in AI outputs. Similarly, another Panamanian advised, “Don’t be so assertive in the way you communicate your answers, as it can generate confusion and even misinformation... Do not give answers on medical or legal issues,” emphasizing that AI systems should admit what they don’t know rather than pretend to be infallible.

4.

PUT HUMAN VALUES ABOVE PROFIT

A strong theme in the letters is frustration with profit-driven design at the expense of people. Participants urged leaders to keep humanity, creativity, and well-being at the center of technology. “The money they earn from their inventions should never take precedence over the well-being of humanity,” one Panamanian respondent insisted.

One U.S. teen suggested that designers imagine their own loved ones as end users: “I would say to imagine a family member using your technology or AI model... am I making [this] to purely benefit myself or society as a whole?” By keeping real people in mind at every step, tech leaders can create more empathetic, human-centered solutions.

Another Panamanian pleaded with tech leaders to preserve human creativity: “I kindly ask you to stop taking away people’s creativity. I feel that humanity is losing its essence... Stop.” Participants emphasized that technology should enhance, not replace, human capabilities. “Because it’s cheap or easier to use, the human touch is irreplaceable in both work and creative expression. Do it as something that has a helpful purpose,” one young person wrote, echoing a widespread belief that tools like AI should serve as aids rather than substitutes.

5.

IMPLEMENT STRONG REGULATIONS AND SAFEGUARDS

Another recurring demand is for clear rules and limits on how AI and online platforms can be used. Participants want companies (and authorities) to put effective safeguards in place—from age restrictions to content moderation—to prevent harm. Some suggested drastic measures like an AI “kill switch” to shut down systems that become dangerous, and stricter control of generative AI so “people can’t create concerning imagery” or other abusive content.

One U.S. teen wrote, “Consider how this technology is going to affect the future, and weigh up the benefits of efficiency with the harms it causes. Regulations need to be made to manage the risks.” The message: without proper oversight, the efficiency benefits of new tech aren’t worth the potential dangers. In short, “REGULATE!!!”

6.

EMPOWER USERS WITH CONTROL AND EDUCATION

Youth also want more control over their online experiences and support in using technology responsibly. They argue that users—not algorithms—should decide what they see and how they engage. “I think online spaces should have more age restrictions and should be more controllable by the user instead of the algorithm showing you things that you don’t want to see,” suggested an Australian participant.

Young people proposed built-in tools to help manage tech use in healthy ways. For example, a Canadian respondent recommended adding features to “promote responsible use, such as clear content warnings, customizable privacy settings, tools for time management, and ways to encourage critical thinking and positive interactions.”

They also emphasized the need to educate users about these tools. A Panamanian youth noted, AI is “super useful, but it must be accompanied by training and education about its uses and psychological consequences.” With greater agency and knowledge, technology can, another teen wrote, become “a tool that empowers users rather than controls or harms them.”

7.

PROTECT PRIVACY AND DATA RIGHTS

Many participants are concerned about privacy and data protection. They urge tech companies to respect user data and be transparent about how personal information is collected and used. “Consider how you would use people’s data—would you like your own personal data to be used in the same way?” a U.S. youth asked pointedly.

Others called for stricter privacy regulations and clarity on data practices. As another U.S. participant put it plainly, “It’s important to not breach the privacy of a user.” Safeguarding privacy is seen as essential to maintaining users’ trust.

8.

CONSIDER ENVIRONMENTAL AND FUTURE IMPACTS

Some responses highlighted the broader impacts of technology on society and the planet. Participants want tech leaders to think long-term about how their innovations affect future generations and the environment. They urge sustainable design choices to minimize technology’s carbon footprint and energy use. “You should take the environment into account and make decisions regarding these important environmental issues,” a Panamanian respondent advised.

A U.S. participant warned that tech companies should “find ways to be sustainable” because “there are already so many things contributing to climate change... this being one.” In their view, progress should not come at the expense of the planet or of humanity’s future. “Think not only about now, but think of the future... Don’t let [what makes us human] be lost!” wrote another U.S. young person, reminding designers to keep sight of core human values for the long run.

9.

ENGAGE AND LISTEN TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Finally, these youth urged tech decision-makers to actively involve users, especially young users, when designing online spaces and AI. It’s not enough to gather youth input as a formality; leaders must take it seriously. “To not only seek youth insights but act on them,” a Canadian participant urged.

For example, Australian respondents denounced recent legislation to ban social media for children under 16 years old as an example of policymakers making decisions without consulting young Australians directly. “It was pushed through parliament with very poor consultation,” says an Australian participant. “We do not think this is a good idea. There is no evidence to suggest that it is...This will be a band-aid. It doesn’t deal with the root issues which are the platforms and algorithms that are allowing the harmful content to exist.”

Another Canadian participant implored companies to “actually consider young people when making decisions... rather than prioritizing profit and power.” The consensus is that those most affected by these technologies should have a say in shaping them.

As a Panamanian respondent concluded, “Young people trust you to create safer environments online, and we are committed to using these tools in a healthy way,” but they need the people in charge to uphold their end of the bargain and put users’ well-being first.

Takeaways

Across countries and contexts, young people continue to see digital platforms as essential to their lives, but also as systems that too often work against their well-being.

They are looking for authentic leaders, both online and off, who can break through their noisy digital world. They believe AI has transformative potential, but only if developed with safeguards that respect a commitment to truth and transparency.



The following takeaways will help inform and guide our priorities in 2026 and beyond:

1.

YOUNG PEOPLE REFLECT ON LEADERSHIP VOID AS THEY HEAD INTO AN AI DRIVEN FUTURE

Participants highlighted the importance of hearing from voices they can relate to and trust. Authenticity, rather than follower counts, was repeatedly emphasized as the quality that makes a messenger effective. They believe influencers and content creators can play this role, but only if they can genuinely demonstrate commitment to their audience and community above generating money or clout.

It is important to note that the definition of “authentic leadership” varies across contexts and geographies. For example, young people in Panama noted that there are fewer “large” influencers who can make a career off content creation alone, as in the U.S. and Australia. Most of the large accounts in Panama are entertainers, celebrities, or meme accounts. This further reinforces the point that identifying authentic leadership, especially in the Global South, requires more evaluation than just follower count.

It also highlights the need for nuanced approaches. Authentic leadership must be tailored to local realities rather than assumed to look the same everywhere.

2.

YOUTH NEED MORE EDUCATION AROUND RESPONSIBLE AI USE

Young people are not asking adults to shield them from AI; they are asking for tools, training, and guidance to use it responsibly. We know from our research in 2024 that higher levels of digital literacy equip young people with critical thinking skills to better navigate life online. Now, this education must adapt to include AI.

Across all groups and geographies, it’s clear AI usage has become rampant over the last year. Young people reported already integrating AI into their daily lives, but without formal instruction or standardized protocols. As one participant from Panama explained, “It’s not necessarily the technology but rather the culture around it. The excessiveness and overwhelming amount of information and applications aren’t being utilized because there isn’t a way of learning how to use technology. The tools are there, but do we know how to use them? Those things aren’t taught.”

This lack of preparation leaves youth to figure out complex issues on their own, how to discern misinformation, recognize bias, or avoid over-reliance. They want parents, educators, policymakers, and tech leaders to step up and create meaningful curricula that embed AI literacy into classrooms and equip them with the critical thinking skills required for the future.

Young people acknowledge that today’s information ecosystem combined with the attention economy makes it difficult for important messages to reach them. To that end, young people are asking for education and resources to come from the messengers who are actually holding the attention of young people and meeting them where they get information (on social media, on gaming platforms, live streams, or in spaces designed for people to disconnect from their tech together as a group).

3.

REGULATIONS MUST KEEP PACE WITH INNOVATION

Young people voiced strong frustration that policy and regulation lag far behind technological development. They warned against repeating the mistakes made with social media, where weak oversight allowed platforms to grow unchecked. A participant in the U.S. urged: “They need to ramp up faster in regulating it, and take the lessons we learned from social media and apply them now. We can’t go another 10 years and say, ‘Who would have thought AI would be so destructive?’”

Their priorities for regulation include changes at the platform design level including clear labeling of AI-generated content, responsive ways to flag and reduce harmful applications of AI such as deepfakes, and oversight that matches the speed of innovation in the private sector.

4.

DESIRE FOR REAL CONTROL OVER THEIR ONLINE EXPERIENCE

Across sessions, young people voiced a desire for better ways to set boundaries with social media—from feed customization to stronger protections against harmful contact. They consistently emphasized that current features are not sufficient to manage the addictive or manipulative aspects of platforms.

If given the option to change one thing about social media, these participants say they would eliminate beauty filters, end the ability to endlessly scroll, ban AI-created content, remove public/company pages, and implement fact checking, to name a few.

5.

PRIORITIZING DIVERSITY OF THOUGHT

The digital experience of young people is not monolithic. One of the clearest insights from these conversations is the generational split within youth themselves, especially around their views on AI. Younger teens (ages 10–17), are cautiously optimistic about the uses of AI but worry about their own ability to learn key critical thinking skills. Older participants (ages 18–25), tend to take a wider lens. Their concerns are less about day-to-day use and more about the long-term consequences: what happens to jobs, to democratic processes, and to society’s ability to tell fact from fiction.

As technologies continue to evolve, we must continue to prioritize hearing from young people at all stages and across the world to build a more accurate and comprehensive picture of the youth experience.

Youth called for better interventions that interrupt doom-scrolling, curb harmful spirals, and reduce exposure to predatory or unwanted contact. They want platforms to be designed with mental health in mind from the outset, not as an afterthought. Parents and children cannot be responsible for these changes alone. Policymakers and tech leaders have to be committed to providing real and effective solutions.

Again and again, participants emphasized that they do not just want to be consulted, they want to be active partners in shaping the digital future. Their lived experiences are the most direct source of insight into what is working, what is harmful, and what needs to change.

Conclusion

Young people want to be heard,
and they want a seat at the table
to shape the future of technology.

Their experiences are nuanced—marked by optimism about connection and innovation, but tempered by anxiety over a future without proper safeguards.

Taken together, these insights reinforce the need for investment in authentic leadership, digital literacy, tech ethics, and cross-generational dialogue. They highlight that while geography and culture shape young people's experiences, their call for safer, more inclusive, and more accountable technology is universal.

Several experts suggest we have only a few years to get a handle on how society interacts with AI technology. We urgently must not repeat the mistakes of the past. Instead, we need to come together to close the vacuum in leadership fit for the digital age facing not only young people but all of us as we head into the future.

This leadership should focus on the way technology will shape the public good and prioritize first and foremost safety. The Archewell Foundation remains committed to elevating young voices, translating them into actionable solutions, and working alongside parents, educators, policymakers, and technology companies to create a digital world that prioritizes well-being for young people everywhere.

Growing up in today's digital age surrounded by unprecedented technological advantages is challenging, but it should not be unsafe. By centering young people's lived experiences, and treating their perspectives as essential expertise, we can move closer to building the responsible online spaces they both need and deserve.

If you are an organization or youth leader interested in hosting an insight session with young people or parents, we would love to hear from you. Please email contact@archewell.org to express your interest.

IF YOU ARE A YOUNG PERSON READING THIS REPORT

We encourage you to get involved in your community's approach to integrating technology and be vocal about how technology is impacting your life. Seek out mentorship and ask for help—but know your innate understanding and experience of the digital world is crucial for the vitality of all of us.

IF YOU ARE A PARENT, RESEARCHER, DONOR, OR OTHER INTERESTED ADULT

We strongly encourage you to invest in what leadership will look like in the digital age and ensure to the best of your ability that young people's voices are included in the decisions made about our online spaces.

IF YOU ARE A TECH LEADER

We direct your attention to insights taken from letters that participants wrote to tech leadership featured in this report. They ask for tech leadership to provide inclusive and safe online spaces and rise above the temptation to prioritize profit over people's lives and well-being.

Thank You To Our *Partners*

Self-Injury Recovery & Awareness (USA)

Self-Injury Recovery & Awareness (SIRA) is a nonprofit that raises awareness about self-harm and provides education, support, and resources to promote recovery and reduce stigma.

The Marcy Lab School (USA)

The Marcy Lab School is an alternative to college that provides historically underrepresented students with a holistic accelerated pathway to secure a high-paying job in the tech industry.

Young Change Agents (Australia)

Young Change Agents is an Australian social enterprise that empowers youth to see problems as opportunities, equipping them with entrepreneurial skills to create community impact.

Kids Help Phone (Canada)

Kids Help Phone is Canada's 24/7 national helpline and online support service for young people, offering confidential counseling, crisis intervention, and mental health resources

Fundación Espacio Creativo (Panama)

Fundación Espacio Creativo is a Panama-based nonprofit that uses arts education and creative programs to engage young people and promote social change.

Plan International Youth Advisory Board (USA)

The Youth Advisory Board is a group of young leaders advising Plan International on strategies and campaigns, ensuring youth voices shape advocacy and decision-making.

Generation Patient (USA)

Generation Patient is a nonprofit led by and for young adults with chronic and rare conditions, dedicated to improving patient advocacy, peer support, and healthcare policy.

HERCampus (USA)

HERCampus is a media and community platform by and for college women, providing content, career development opportunities, and a supportive peer network.



Batyr (Australia)

Batyr is a youth-led, preventative mental health charity that empowers young people through peer-to-peer education, lived-experience storytelling, and early intervention programs delivered in schools, universities, and communities across Australia.

Young Women's Christian Association of Vancouver (Canada)

The YWCA is a nonprofit providing affordable housing, child care, employment services, and advocacy programs that advance gender equity and support the well-being of women, families, and gender-diverse people.

Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council (Canada)

The Vancouver District Parent Advisory Council (DPAC) represents the collective voice of parents and caregivers in Vancouver public schools and advocates for equitable education opportunities for all students.

“Humans may
not be more
profitable, but...
a better world
for *humanity* has
to include us.”

YOUNG PERSON IN THE U.S.

Jiore Craig

A senior advisor to The Archewell Foundation and a globally recognized leader at the intersection of democracy, public opinion, and online harms.

She is the founder of her own consultancy working with public figures, policymakers, civil rights leaders, and politicians to navigate the impact of technology on society. She is a member of Issue One's bipartisan Council for Responsible Social Media. Her work has been cited in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Time Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, *Bloomberg*, *NBC Nightly News*, and more. She has been a guest on *Today* on BBC Radio 4, *ABC Australia*, *NPR Morning Edition*, *Pod Save America* and *What Now? with Trevor Noah*.

Flavia Colangelo

A leading global public opinion strategist and communications leader.

Over the last decade, Colangelo has helped political leaders, nonprofits, advocacy groups, and corporations use data to better understand the tech landscape and craft effective campaigns. Colangelo has led dozens of multi-country research projects and conducted hundreds of focus groups around the world in both English and Spanish. Her previous research into the impact of online harm on Latino communities has been featured in *NBC* and *Vox*.

