




halogen



split
screens

The Polarised
Realities of Youth in a
Tech-Driven World



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introduction

Today's youth are the first true digital natives, growing up in a hyper-connected world dominated by smartphones, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence (AI). In Singapore, recent studies found that teenagers aged 13 to 19 spend an average of **8.5 hours daily on screens, with smartphones contributing nearly 3.5 hours of that time**¹.



*Teenagers aged 13 to 19 spend an average of **8.5 hours** daily on screens.*



*With **smartphones usage contributing nearly 3.5 hours** out of that time.*

Meanwhile, **AI use is also increasing, with a local survey reporting that 84% of secondary school students use AI at least weekly to support their schoolwork**². The prevalence of digital usage among youth today reflects how these are not just tools, but ingrained parts of their daily lives and identity. It represents a profound cultural shift that shapes the way young people learn, socialise, and express themselves in the 21st century. Emerging research reveals concerning links between extended and addictive technology and negative impacts on young people's mental health, including difficulties with attention, emotional fatigue, and increased risks of anxiety and depression³.

As a youth development organisation committed to nurturing young people to thrive, we recognise the importance of understanding this digital landscape through the eyes of the youth. Their perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes toward technology can either mitigate or exacerbate these risks, making it essential to explore this phenomenon more closely. By gaining insight into their experiences with smartphones, social media and AI, we can better inform supportive strategies and empower them to thrive and harness technology in a positive way.

This report aims to provide a holistic, youth-centred exploration of themes, drawing on both quantitative data and qualitative reflections from youths. The following pages will examine evolving patterns of use, attitudes, and experiences with these digital tools. We highlight opportunities for youths' connection and growth, as well as the polarities and tensions that shape every aspect of their life in the digital age. By surfacing these themes, we hope to offer a nuanced perspective on how young people navigate increasingly complex digital environments and lay the groundwork for practical strategies to support their well-being, agency, and resilience moving forward.

methodology

Our exploration of the topic employed a mixed-methods research design to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and attitudes of youth.

Quantitative Phase

We administered two sets of polls among students from various Singapore Secondary Schools (ages 13 to 16) to first capture patterns and prevalence of smartphones, social media usage and bans, and then understand perceptions of AI technology.

1. Smartphone/Social Media Restrictions and Usage

- Sample: 1117 youths
- Data collection period: February to April 2025

2. AI Perception and Usage

- Sample: 2152 youths
- Data collection period: April to June 2025

Qualitative Phase

To enrich and contextualise the quantitative findings, we conducted in-depth focus groups with older youths (ages 16 to 21), inviting them to share their personal habits, beliefs, and insights on smartphone use, social media, and AI. This qualitative phase sought to provide a deeper understanding of the perspectives and lived experiences behind the poll results.

1. Focus Groups:

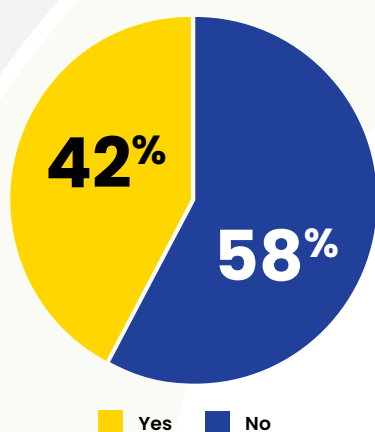
- Sample: 10 youths
- Data collection period: August 2025

Findings from both quantitative and qualitative phases were triangulated, allowing for comparison between broad behavioural trends and the nuanced perspectives surfaced in the focus groups.

In addition to primary data collection, we also drew upon a broad review of existing literature, reports, and publicly available data to ensure our analysis was grounded in current knowledge and reflected broader trends and concerns about youth interactions with smartphones, social media, and AI technology.

youth findings on smartphone restrictions

Smartphone bans in schools have become a prevalent global trend. In UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report⁴, **as of late 2024, approximately 40% of education systems worldwide have introduced policies to restrict or ban mobile phone use during school hours.** Amid growing research showing the relationship between prolonged screen time on smartphones and mental health issues in youth, concurrent to the period of our study, schools in Singapore have also recently stepped up measures to regulate and restrict smartphone usage during school hours⁵. Additionally, in a recent survey on potential policy options towards digitalisation⁶, **more than half (58%) of Singaporean residents expressed support for a mandatory ban on smartphones in Primary and Secondary schools.**



Our findings provide a grounded snapshot reflecting the perspectives and experiences of youths themselves, and from the poll, we observed a slightly different take, with **58% of the youths indicating “No” when asked if they think schools should limit phone use.** However, this also means that 4 in 10 of them showed support, suggesting that a level of concern around phone overuse or misuse may also exist among our youth.

What do youths think about schools limiting phone usage?

Our focus group discussions with older youths offered deeper insight into these attitudes. They generally acknowledge and express concerns about the overuse and misuse of their smartphones, but several reject complete bans, as they feel that this does not address the root issue. They believe that the challenge is not just the presence of devices themselves, but rather a lack of responsible digital habits, self-regulation skills, and critical digital literacy. Simply banning smartphones would not help to solve these issues, and may even encourage misuse once restrictions are lifted.

If you prevent someone from doing something and suddenly give them the luxury to do it, they will overuse it.

- Male, 21

My school restricts phone use. Personally, I think it’s good, but I notice not everyone feels the same way, and I see some Sec 1 students just using their iPads to scroll YouTube shorts instead.

- Female, 16

Being able to use it and learning how to manage it, rather than completely banning it, which opens the floodgates of misuse or exposure to content online.

- Male, 21

That said, our youths still recognise the harms of misuse, and some believe that restrictions can be beneficial, particularly for younger or less mature students who may struggle to regulate their device usage independently. In these cases, complete removal during school hours provides a necessary “physical” barrier to help manage overuse, allowing for more focused learning and face-to-face interaction. Even so, our youths emphasise that these **restrictions must be purposeful**, focusing on digital etiquette and social relationships rather than blanket bans. With screens playing a central role in our daily lives, cutting down on usage through a complete removal might prove to be a struggle and could even feel like withdrawal, potentially triggering anxiety and discomfort among youths. Therefore, helping young people understand the reasons behind the implemented restrictions could help support them in developing healthier responsibility and autonomy over their smartphone usage over time.

I think schools should restrict it. Currently, we have to lock our phones in lockers, which means no social media for 6 hours in school. It's good because it allows me to have face-to-face conversations with my friends.

- Female, 16

For my school, we have a 'Disconnect to Connect' movement where they discourage phone usage because it could be disrespectful to keep using our phones in front of others. We're encouraged to disconnect to build relationships with others.

- Female, 16

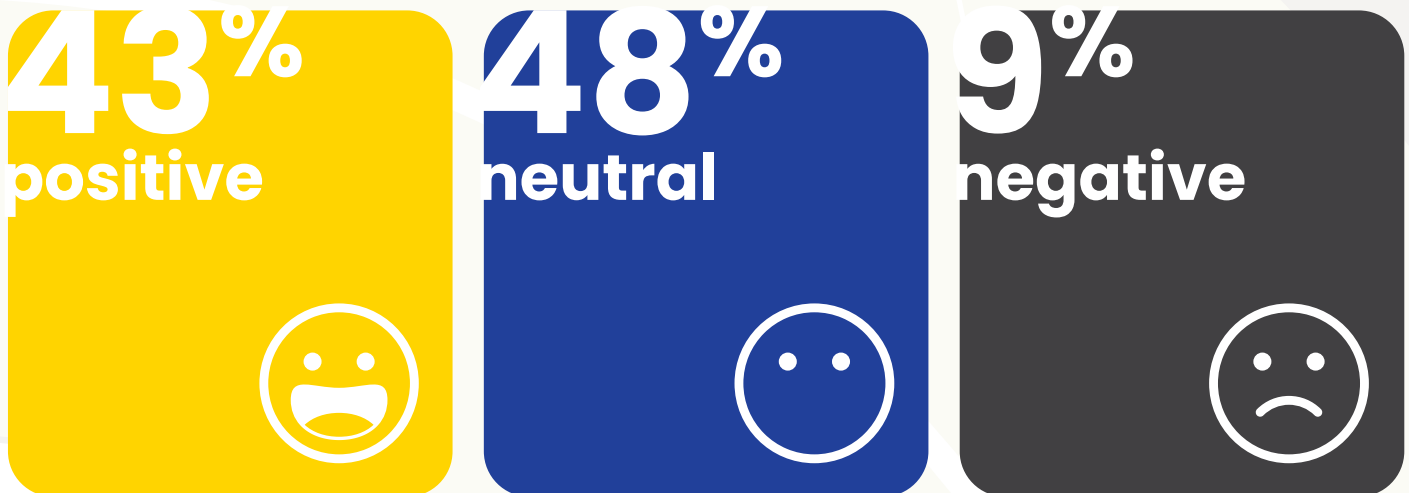
The diversity of views suggests that while restrictions play a role, particularly for younger youths or those struggling with self-regulation, they are not seen as a long-term solution, but as a supportive measure that must be applied thoughtfully. The consensus among our youths is that the **focus should be on holistic digital well-being education** that equips youths with skills to manage their phone use independently. Schools adopting restrictive policies should consider **complementary strategies**, including fostering digital responsibility, promoting meaningful offline interactions, and **contextualising device use** to build healthy habits and behaviours.

The topic of smartphone restrictions in schools reveals just one part of a broader challenge faced among youth: the pervasive influence of social media on attention and behaviour. In our conversations with youths, we further explore their experiences and attitudes towards social media, offering insight into how these digital spaces impact their lives beyond the classroom.

youth findings on social media realities

As digital natives, it is undeniable that social media plays a huge role in the lives of our youth, serving as the primary platform for communication, entertainment, and information. A recent study among youth and parents across Singapore and Australia⁷ reveals that while social media can foster connectedness, self-expression and learning, there are rising concerns of mental health and emotional well-being risks associated with its use.

From our poll with young people, when asked how they feel about social media's impact on them, the **majority perceived social media's effect as either favourable (43% positive) or neither strongly positive nor negative (48% neutral)**. This substantial proportion of neutral responses highlights both a possible lack of awareness and the complexity of social media's role in youths' everyday experiences.



In our focus group discussions, our youths reveal a range of complex and often conflicting emotions, behaviours, and self-reflections. As they shared about their experiences, we found that their relationship with social media can be characterised by tensions and polarities across three core domains:

- **Identity and Self-Image:** Where youths negotiate the gap between their online and real-world selves, balancing authenticity with their desire to curate attractive content
- **Emotional Well-being and Regulation:** Where social media serves as both a source of relaxation and connection, it also triggers aspiration and the pull against their personal responsibilities
- **Behavioural Self-Management:** Where youths contend with the challenge of exercising control and freedom amid pervasive digital engagement

We will delve into each tension-filled theme to reveal the nuanced ways social media shapes youth identity, well-being, and digital habits.

Identity and Self-Image

Online <> Real Self

The rise of **social media** has reshaped the way we perceive and construct our sense of self, and we now find ourselves navigating hybrid worlds and identities, both online and offline. For youth, especially, adolescence is a critical stage for self-exploration and identity formation, a period when they naturally seek to understand who they are, what they value, and how they relate to others. Today, this journey unfolds not only in face-to-face settings but increasingly through the curated lens of digital platforms. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok create spaces that encourage users to experiment with self-expression, creativity, and personal branding. In our conversations with youths, some mentioned that they actively curate versions of themselves online, spending time thinking about the kind of persona or identity they want to display on their social media platforms. A few of them also create different accounts, namely their main account and their spam account, to showcase and experiment with their various personas or interests.

Though such opportunities can **empower creativity, identity-exploration, and connection with peers and interest groups**, our youths also express anxiety **over how their personas would be scrutinised online**. There is fluidity in the online space that enables young people to channel different facets of their personality, but the process is rarely straightforward. Should the “online self” differ significantly from how they feel or act in real life, it could lead to internal conflict over which self is “real” and anxieties about not measuring up to their digital image.

I consider myself quite active on my main. It's a way for me to channel the aesthetic version of myself, just a convenient outlet for me to express it. I'm not forcing myself to perform a more cleaned-up version of myself, I just think it's a fun way of expression.

- Female, 16

Your online presence and IRL presence can be very different, and people may choose to prioritise one over the other. If we know ourselves more deeply, we may know how to prioritise. If not, it can be quite confusing or stressful because you're thinking about how others look at you. It can be quite toxic when you limit yourself to thinking that way.

- Female, 19

I feel like I overthink too much. Should I really post about this? Because after 5 years, people will still see this. Do I even want people to see my face, or should I just take pictures without my face?

- Female, 17

I'm very private and careful about what I post. For me, there is a sort of standard that I feel I need to hit when I post something.

- Female, 17

Though some youths **understand and acknowledge that most people tend to showcase only their best moments online**, they still find themselves caught in **cycles of comparison**, feeling inadequate when faced with the seemingly perfect images and achievements of others. The act of presenting one's authentic self (flaws and all) does not sit well with everyone. Some youths recognise that it is an effort to promote imperfection and inclusivity online, but they remain deeply self-conscious about what they post, feeling pressure to present and maintain a perfect profile online.

The efforts to make social media a more imperfect and inclusive space haven't been very effective for me. Still self-conscious about the things that I post. When I see others post something embarrassing or cringe, it makes me feel uncomfortable because to me, I want my image on social media to be perfect.

- Female, 17

Authenticity <> Curation

As youths create their online presence, the tension between authenticity and curation is a recurring theme. Youths shared that they are often careful about what they post online, with some feeling there are unspoken standards and rules they should abide by.

We logically know that everyone puts their highlight moments on their stories, but it doesn't sink in. I still want to compare even though I know it's them putting out their best moments. I feel bad about myself. At 16, I'm hypersensitive to all these things.

- Female, 16

On a positive side, the ability to select and disclose how they want to present themselves online enables youth to **explore and form their identities and gain clarity of their sense of selves**. However, increased exposure to curated, idealised versions of peers and influencers has the potential to **amplify feelings of vulnerability, insecurity, and anxiety**, especially if their sense of self-worth becomes entangled with online validation. As young people endeavour to form their identities, tensions may arise as they juggle the desire to use social media as a means to explore and express their unique identities, coupled with social pressure to curate trendy content, or what may attract positive attention. This ongoing push-pull can lead to feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty about which aspects of themselves to share or conceal.

This pressure to curate, compare, and belong does not just play out online – it also shapes how youth seek connection and validation offline.

Read more: How social connection and peer influence shape blind box collecting among youths.



Emotional Well-being and Regulation

Connection <> Aspiration

One of the top reasons why youth use social media, and the positive impact they feel it has on them, is that these platforms are **central in enabling meaningful connections with their peers, building new friendships, and offering inspiration and avenues to explore new interests.**

However, this connectivity also comes with hidden costs. As an extension to the previous theme of identity formation, the constant stream of curated achievements, highlight reels, and “ideal” lifestyles can foster feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt through upward social comparison. While connection can boost belonging and happiness, if not careful, it can turn into a relentless upward comparison that fuels envy, dissatisfaction, and lower self-esteem, leaving youths oscillating between feeling included and feeling left behind. This dynamic was described by our youths who spoke about feeling pressured to emulate others’ successes or losing sight of their own priorities after seeing what their peers are working towards.

It’s useful when you want to keep in touch with friends, especially after we graduate from school and may never meet each other again.

- Female, 17

It allows me to see what my friends are doing in their lives, and you can learn a lot from social media too, like learning another language.

- Female, 16

Instagram allows me to stay in contact with my friends, especially when I’m studying abroad but it also affects my self-esteem and happiness when I compare myself with others.


- Male, 21

When I see what others post, it messes up the things that I want to prioritise. When I see what others accomplish, then I feel like maybe I should focus on that too. But then I realise, I’m working on something that worked well for someone else, and it might not work well for me.

- Female, 16

While social platforms shape how youths connect and compare, long-term resilience is rooted in clarity of values and self-understanding.

Read more: **Anchored Within — building youth leaders from the inside out.**



Relaxation <> Responsibility

Another top reason youths use social media is that it serves as an accessible source of relaxation and an escape after a stressful day, providing entertainment, mood-lightening content, and an easy way to decompress with friends.

I'll either scroll TikTok or Instagram or play games with friends. We'd sit side by side and play games together. It helps to lighten the mood and helps us forget our problems.
- Male, 21

It's a good source of entertainment for me. Especially on my FYP, it will feed me what I like and want to see.
- Female, 19

Especially during peak periods, I just need an escape, so I will start scrolling my feed on my socials.
- Female, 16

From the youth excerpts, it is evident that the positive engagement young people receive from social media can provide them with a sense of relaxation, entertainment, and even support at times. At the same time, they feel a sense of responsibility to keep up with schoolwork, participate in social activities, and stick to personal goals. The tension emerges when social media's ease and entertainment pull against daily responsibilities, and their desire to strike a balance in their usage of social media.

The moment I start doomscrolling, I feel like my concept of time goes away.
- Female, 16

My eyes burn, but I still do it. After a day's work, you're very tired, but your day has been so dry and you just want to lighten it. You think you'd want just to spend five minutes on your phone, but it ends up becoming two hours.
- Male, 21

After one hour, I feel terrible because I didn't want to use it for so long, but then again, it is relaxing for me.
- Female, 16

While such use can be soothing and enjoyable, these activities can quickly become double-edged: time easily slips away while "doomscrolling", leading to feelings of shock, guilt and frustration when they realise they have overspent time online. It has an emotional toll on them as they face both the highs of connection and joy and the lows of guilt and fatigue. In their experience, it is clear that young people struggle to strike a balance and find effective ways to regulate their emotions after spending time online, which could lead to heightened anxiety and emotional exhaustion.

Behavioural Self-Management

Control <> Freedom

In this domain, youth find themselves managing the tension between autonomy and discipline. Though social media may represent freedom through the opportunities for self-expression, exploration, and connection on their own terms, youth also strive for control over their digital habits. For some, the temptation and potential for overuse are so strong that the only workable strategy is to remove their access to apps or devices entirely. This proactive avoidance reflects a recognition of personal vulnerability and an attempt to avoid getting addicted or hooked on social media.

On the other end, we also had other youths who tried to engage with social media in a more controlled manner, by setting personal limits or creating self-imposed boundaries. Some have tried enlisting the help of their parents to manage their usage time. Others look to time-management apps like Forest, which help users stay focused by growing a virtual tree on their phone for a set duration. Users get to plant a seed on the app, and if they don't leave the app, the tree grows. Leaving the app causes the tree to die, creating a visual representation of their commitment and motivation to reduce phone usage and build better habits.

I avoided social media. Didn't get it till after O levels because I knew from a young age, I don't have that kind of control and I will spiral.

- Female, 17

When I was younger, to manage my screen time, I used to leave my phone with my dad and ask him to read to me any messages that come in. I would also set screen time limits for myself to control my usage.

- Male, 20

I use the Forest app and set screen time limits so I won't get distracted and can "lock in" when I really need to do work.

- Female, 17

Despite these strategies, maintaining consistent self-regulation can be an ongoing challenge. Our youths shared that at times, even with intentional limits, the pull to get on social media still exists, and they find themselves either creating ways to circumvent the restrictions they have set up for themselves or disabling them after a while.

I tried the Forest app too, but it didn't work for me because I ended up not caring that much about growing trees anyway.

- Male, 16

I feel like I can easily detach myself from my phone because if someone takes my phone away, I can always go to my iPad instead. It's not so much the device but the fact that I feel the need to be updated and check in on social media.

- Female, 19

The tension is evident here, where complete removal and avoidance of social media serve to limit use, but only for immediate and temporal usage. Our youths struggle to manage their usage and exercise self-regulation in not only setting boundaries, but following through with them as well. This is similar to the discussion on smartphone restrictions in schools, where a healthy balance between limitation and regulation should be emphasised. Though we can support young people in developing self-regulation skills, **effective behavioural self-management is not only an issue of individual willpower, but it is also shaped by the digital ecosystem and the support from their environment.** Stepping in to provide useful guidelines and build lasting habits could be ways to further support youths as they navigate and thrive amidst these digital challenges.



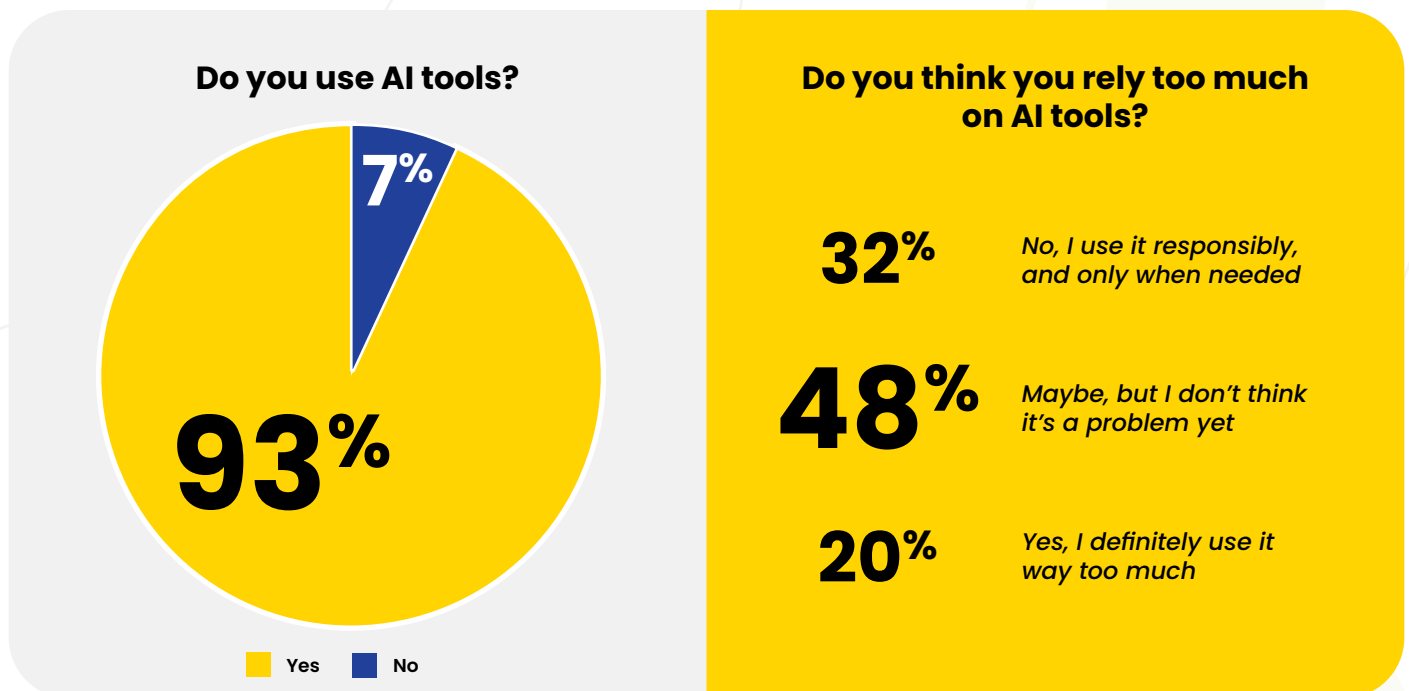
Navigating digital life requires more than boundaries – it takes guidance, practice, and support.

youth findings on exploring artificial intelligence

Usage and Attitudes

On top of smartphones and social media usage in recent years, AI has emerged as another major technology shaping the daily experiences of today's youth. From chatbots, image generators, and personalised learning aides, these tools are increasingly integrated into how young people study, create, socialise, and solve problems. This next section explores youth AI usage patterns and attitudes. We delve into the complexities of their enthusiasm, cautious trust, and ethical reflections in utilising AI tools and examine their perspectives on how they navigate these tools and envision their role in a future that increasingly blends human creation with artificial intelligence.

From our poll with youths, **a large majority of them (93%) reported using AI tools at least once**, signalling widespread adoption among this generation. While nearly one-fifth (20%) acknowledged that they definitely rely on AI excessively, close to half (48%) expressed ambivalence, recognising they might be using AI more than necessary but do not see it as a problem yet. Meanwhile, about one-third (32%) of youths indicated that they use AI tools responsibly and only when needed.



In our discussion with older youths, all of them reported to be currently using AI tools, and view AI as an integral and almost indispensable part of their daily lives. Many see AI as an evolution of the times and now a natural part of their lives. The adoption of AI was also described as an unconscious integration, with increasing tools being embedded in everyday tasks, such as search engines providing AI-generated answers. Not using it can feel unavoidable, and may increase feelings of falling behind in a world that is progressing faster than ever.

Using AI is like the baseline now. People will be left behind if they don't use AI since it's the norm. Not using AI is like choosing to use an abacus instead of a calculator.

- Male, 21

We use AI more than we are conscious of. It's integrated into so many things now. When I search for something on Google, now the answers are given to me by AI. It's hard to control our usage.

- Female, 16

As active users, our youths shared key reasons behind using AI, such as the **convenience** and **support** that it provides. Many see AI as an accessible tool that fills gaps where human help may be limited, such as offering instant answers when teachers are unavailable, or assisting with school tasks like providing feedback. The ability of AI to simplify formal tasks, like writing emails and presentation scripts, also helps youth conserve mental energy for other more important tasks.

I use AI when I'm studying. I don't have access to my teachers all the time, so I ask AI for feedback on my work, and I think they give me very good comments.

- Female, 16

Sometimes, I feel like asking my teacher might be a waste of their time, and some might even be reluctant to answer me, but ChatGPT will never reject any request!

- Female, 17

AI is my best friend for writing emails. I dislike the formality I have to use when I write to teachers. AI helps me save brain power that I don't have to spend on.

- Female, 16

It's helpful when I forget the deadline for my work. I usually have a script that I will put into AI, and it creates a presentation for me.

- Male, 21

Our findings echo insights from a separate study done on youth attitudes towards AI⁸. In the study, nearly **4 in 10** of the youths surveyed indicated that they want AI to support learning, help manage workloads, and improve the efficiency of their work.

In general, based on their current use of AI, youths exhibit a **forward-looking mindset** towards AI. They agree that AI tools are here to stay; hence, their focus should be on how they can utilise AI to support them in their work, rather than replace or reject them.

In their sharing, they often describe and acknowledge that AI should be seen as a partner in enhancing output, rather than a competitor to be feared or fully relied upon. As such, they emphasise the importance of **upskilling** and **staying informed**, to evaluate AI outputs and still make informed decisions independently and effectively.

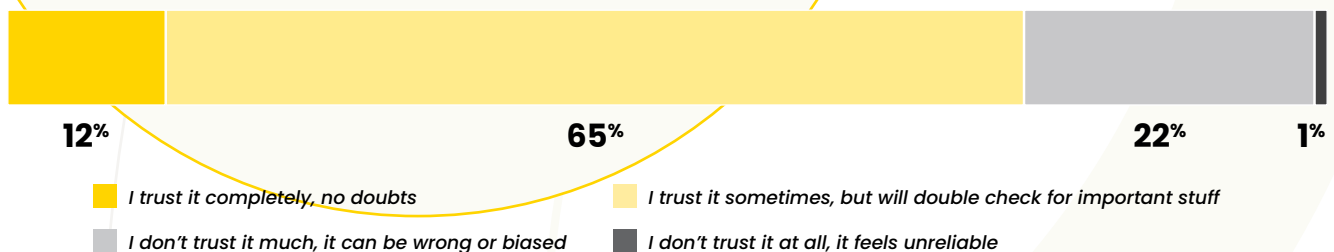
I generally support using AI. For those who think that AI will replace them, I think we need to see AI as an assistant rather than a competitor.
 - Female, 16

Need to think of AI as a support for human operation, not the other way around. We can't rely on AI for 100% accuracy. Our skill sets are still valuable, and we should use them to evaluate AI and think about how to use it to enhance our work.
 - Male, 21

I think AI as a tool is not a bad thing. The main point is the need for us humans to be upskilling.
 - Female, 16

Concerns, Cautions, and Ethical Reflections

Though youth generally embrace the ubiquity of AI in their everyday lives, they are not without fears or concerns. In our poll, we asked youths how much they trust the answers or information that AI gives them. 12% of them indicated that they would trust it completely without doubts, while **the majority (65%) trust it sometimes, but would still double-check for more important items**. About 2 in 10 of them indicated low trust in AI.



More recently, with the launch of OpenAI's new image generator, an imitation of Studio Ghibli's art style has become readily accessible to everyday users⁹. Since then, social media platforms have seen a surge of posts featuring Studio Ghibli-inspired images reimagined through these generative tools. **This trend sparked strong reactions among fans and commentators**, most of whom felt that **using AI to replicate an artist's signature aesthetic stands in direct opposition to the philosophy of Studio Ghibli and its co-founder Hayao Miyazaki**, who is renowned for his commitment to originality and hand-crafted artistry. We explored this phenomenon among youths to get their thoughts on this trend.



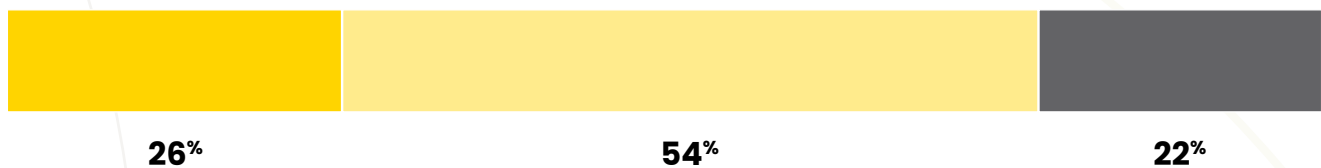
Ponyo (2008) features around 170,000 hand-drawn frames, reflecting Miyazaki's insistence on minimising reliance on computer graphics.

Image credits — © 2005-2025 STUDIO GHIBLI Inc.

If you could use AI tools to turn your photos into a cool, trendy art style like that of Studio Ghibli, would you try it?



Would you like to have more AI tools that let people recreate famous art styles, such as those of Studio Ghibli or Vincent van Gogh?



■ Yes ■ Maybe ■ No

In our poll, about a third (34%) of the youths indicated they would be interested in using an AI tool to stylise their images in a trendy art style, while nearly half (48%) were open to it but less certain. 19% of them were not interested in it at all. When asked if they wanted more of such AI tools, the pattern was similar.

Their responses reflect both the appeal and debate surrounding generative AI in art. Though some youths are drawn to the novelty, creativity, and shareability of AI-created art, the majority remain **cautiously curious**. This sentiment was highlighted in our discussions with the older youths as well, with **concerns around originality, authenticity, and fairness** raised as considerations and implications of automated artistic creation.

I don't think AI can replicate the thought that artists put behind their artwork. Their emotions and thoughts will get lost when it's created by AI.

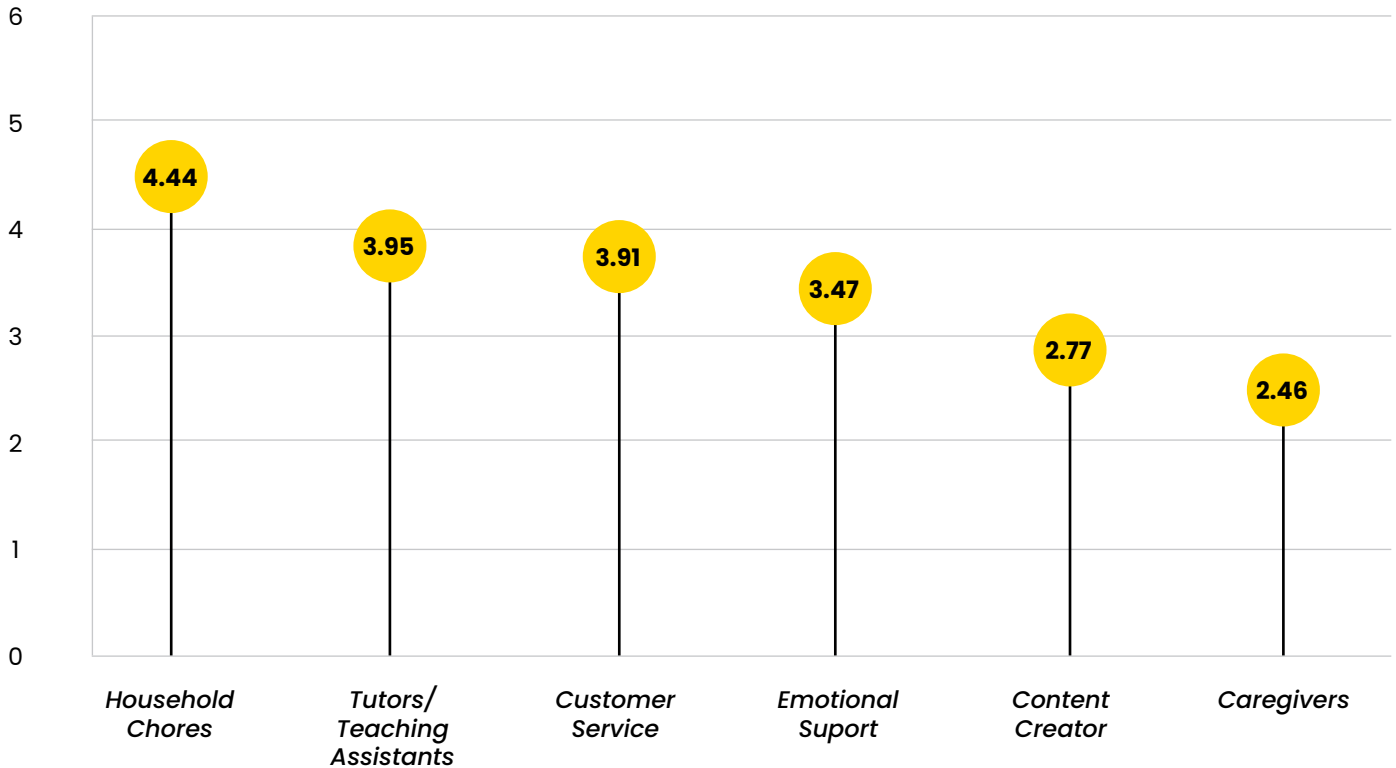
- Female, 17

Creative expression has a lot to do with individual expression, so replicating art styles could make the artists feel like their art is being stolen from them.

- Female, 16

Looking ahead, as technology continues to evolve, the reality of human-like robots living among us feels closer than ever. To understand how youths would feel about this potential future, we asked them to rank their comfort level with human-like robots performing various tasks.

Ranking of comfort level with a human-like robot performing tasks



**Youths were asked to rank (from 1 to 6) with each task based on their on their comfort level. The scores are the average ranking of each task, with higher scores indicating a higher comfort level.*

The results show that our youths generally feel more comfortable with human-like robots handling practical, task-based roles such as household chores, tutoring, or customer service, but express more hesitation when robots take on responsibilities requiring emotional support, creativity, or caregiving. This pattern suggests that young people do feel a level of discomfort with robots replacing the uniquely human roles that rely on empathy, originality, and personal connection.

Diving deeper into their concerns, the youths in our focus groups also acknowledged that there are various challenges and risks associated with AI.

Key concerns brought up by youths in our focus group discussions:

Misinformation and accuracy

My friends and I had to give some examples for an essay, so we used AI to help generate a long list of resources and we memorised what it gave us. However, after a while, I started to wonder if the examples were real and later found out that it wasn't. When I asked AI, it even admitted that it was false.

- Female, 16

I got backstabbed by ChatGPT. I put in some prompts for questions in a test and they gave me the wrong answer.

- Male, 21

There are enough instances where AI gives me the wrong answers to a problem (e.g. math questions).

- Male, 20

Loss of authentic experience and human touch

It's scary when you can't differentiate between what's created by humans or AI.

- Male, 21

I would never just copy and paste answers from AI. I would read the answers and then rewrite them. This ensures that what I have is a good mix of AI content and still retains my own voice.

- Female, 17

I think there was a study that said your neural engagement tends to go down with repeated use of AI?

- Male, 16

I used to like using emdashes, but now that is a mark of something written by AI, so I refrain from using them as often anymore.

- Female, 16

Ethical and privacy concerns

I read somewhere that it's actually quite scary how easily AI can be manipulated. If you feed it too much of one dataset, it will be skewed. Imagine if the tool is too skewed for applications to things like healthcare.

- Female, 17

Heard from a podcast with Sam Altman that our conversations with ChatGPT may be used in court... where is the privacy in that?

- Male, 16

Youths' concerns about AI are deeply rooted in their personal experiences with the tools, reflecting a growing awareness of not just the benefits but the potential pitfalls of advanced technology in their lives. Most of them highlighted the challenge of misinformation and accuracy, noting that at present, AI tools can produce convincing but unreliable answers. Our youths faced several instances where AI-generated examples or solutions were incorrect, which led to scepticism and caution when relying on such tools. It echoes the findings of our poll, where only about 1 in 10 of them would trust the answers AI gives them without doubt.

There is also a prevailing concern about the loss of authenticity and the diminishing human touch. Some youths worry about the blurring lines between what is considered human-generated or machine-generated content, feeling uneasy about how difficult it can be at times to distinguish the two. The desire to maintain one's individuality and creativity comes through fairly strongly, with some still preferring to adapt or rewrite AI responses rather than use them as-is, ensuring their own voice remains present. Others have also become more conscious and have changed their writing styles to avoid elements perceived as typically AI-generated. These subtle actions are indicative of the self-expression that youths try to embody in their work. In addition, their response to using AI tools to recreate images in famous art styles reflects similar concerns around authenticity and originality. Though some of them may be eager to use generative AI to create or recreate art, others feel more conflicted, and are concerned that AI art may lack the intentionality and emotional depth that human artists bring to their creations.

As youth adopt and use more of these AI tools, they are also increasingly attuned to some of the mechanics behind the tools. Though most of them are still unclear of how the technology works and what its broader implications might be, the few who express greater interest in the technology have gone on to read articles or listen to podcasts on the topic of AI. Through these sources of information, they learn and are subsequently more concerned about issues of data manipulation and bias, the use of personal data in legal contexts, or the storage and sharing of personal conversations for commercial purposes.

Embracing AI with Curiosity and Caution

From the youths we polled and spoke to, we find that young people have embraced AI as an integral part of their lives, leveraging it for convenience, learning, and creative expression while remaining aware of its limitations and potential risks. The prevailing mindset reflects both curiosity and caution—they view AI as a valuable tool, yet feel the need to remind themselves that it should not be seen as a replacement for human judgment, creativity, and authentic experience. Despite widespread use, trust in AI remains conservative, with most youths double-checking important information and expressing reservations about originality, privacy, and the erosion of human touch.

As AI tools become more deeply embedded in our everyday lives, these perspectives highlight the importance of supporting youths in navigating the promises and pitfalls of AI.



Youths see AI as a powerful tool for learning and creativity – but not a replacement for human judgment or originality.

closing thoughts

This report presents a comprehensive overview of how young people today interact with smartphones, social media, and AI—technologies that have become an integral part of their daily lives. While these tools are used extensively, youths navigate their digital experiences through a complex landscape characterised by ongoing polarities and tensions. Their interactions with these technologies reveal a continual balancing act between embrace and restraint, opportunity and risk, connection and overload, empowerment and vulnerability.

In the realm of smartphones and social media, youth balance the positive uses of technology (for connection, entertainment, self-expression, and information) with its challenges (overuse, social comparison, emotional fatigue, and struggles with self-regulation). They feel like they are constantly negotiating between authenticity and curation, connection and aspiration, relaxation and responsibility, and control and freedom.

Similarly, youths' adoption of AI tools conveys both excitement over the possibilities AI offers and wariness about its limitations and potential harms. They recognise AI as a powerful assistant, yet remain cautious about misinformation, loss of human touch, ethical uses, and privacy risks.

These polarities are not isolated, but intersect to define the complex digital landscape that youths must navigate. Each tension underscores a core challenge: how to harness the benefits of digital technology while mitigating its emotional, ethical, and cognitive costs.

While this report offers valuable snapshots into youth interactions with smartphones, social media, and AI, it is not the whole picture. Our exploration of the beliefs and mindsets that youths have around these technologies is limited to a small and specific group, which may not fully capture the diversity of youth experiences nationwide. Future research could broaden the sample scope, dive deeper to investigate how different youth sub-groups navigate these polarities, and explore practical strategies to continue supporting youths amidst evolving technologies.

Regardless, through acknowledging and addressing these enduring tensions, this report provides important insights into the complex ways youths engage with technology, laying a foundation for how we can better empower the next generation to thrive in a digital age. Helping young people develop discernment and resilience to navigate these polarities will be crucial in shaping a future where technology enhances, rather than hinders, their growth, creativity, and authentic human connection.



Navigating the polarities of the digital world, image (ironically) generated by AI.

Interested in empowering youths to navigate life's complexities?

Halogen is developing a series of workshops for youths to tackle the complexities of their daily activities and interactions. In these workshops, youths will...

- Apply the polarity map to develop clearer self-awareness of their blind spots and growth areas for their personal leadership development
- Use the polarity map to understand interpersonal dynamics and synergies when they work with others (e.g. navigating tensions in group settings, working together with opposite polarities)
- Develop action steps to work towards a healthy balance between poles to achieve personal and interpersonal effectiveness

Our workshops will include interactive discussions, hands-on mapping exercises, and relatable school scenarios to engage youths and equip them with the tools to harness the strengths of polarities.



If you're interested in exploring Polarities for your youths, scan the QR code to indicate your interest, and we will get in touch!



As part of a leadership camp at St Joseph's Institution, student leaders mapped their individual polarity poles and identified areas of blind spots and growth with action steps to become more effective leaders moving forward.

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