Growing Pains

How today's young people are rewriting the narrative of childhood

The twenty-first century has radically redefined the experience of navigating the world as a young person

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has been a period of immense cultural and technological upheaval, fundamentally reshaping our relationship with the media we consume. The rapid proliferation of smartphones and tablets, combined with the emergence of streaming services, social media, and user-generated content hubs, has created a globe-spanning content ecosystem—one that the majority of us are plugged into almost every waking moment of our lives.

The bold predictions from the turn of the millennium that we had reached "the end of history" turned out to be deeply misguided. The past twenty-five years have had no shortage of intractable global crises—from the rising tide of political extremism to the looming threat of climate catastrophe. Meanwhile, black swan events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the Great Recession have left a lasting impact on the daily patterns of our lives, serving to remind all of us just how fragile our social institutions truly are.

All of these trends have had a lasting impact on the experience of growing up and navigating the world as a young person. Today's kids and teens are growing up in a world that looks and feels profoundly different from that of their parents or grandparents—one in which concepts like community, fandom, and connection have taken on entirely new meanings. For parents and educators, meanwhile, the rapid proliferation of new technologies and new forms of content has brought with it both challenges and opportunities in equal measure.

That's why **NRG**, a leading global insights firm, and **Young Storytellers**, a non-profit that provides young people with opportunities to express themselves and tell their own stories, have come together to unpack the ways in which the past two and a half decades have reshaped the meaning of childhood.

AT A GLANCE

In this paper, we'll explore:

The unique relationship that today's kids and teens have with technology

What it's like for young people to grow up in a world that feels like it's constantly on fire

The types of media and content that today's kids value the most

Through this analysis, we'll provide a comprehensive picture of what it means to be a kid or teen in 2025—and identify some of the ways in which tech platforms, media companies, and policymakers can better serve the needs of today's young people.

1 Life mediated by tech

For today's kids and teens, technology has a crucial role to play in mediating their relationships with others and shaping how they see the world. In a culture where opportunities for in-person socialization are increasingly hard to come by, young people's devices are a crucial lifeline that allows them to connect with others and build communities.

2 A world in permacrisis

Young people are becoming increasingly pessimistic about the state of our world and its direction of travel. To many, it feels as if we're constantly lurching from one disaster to another. This ambient sense of a world in crisis plays a major role in shaping Gen Alpha's views and values, and what they're looking for from movies, TV shows, and video games.

3 Content overload

It's never been easier for kids and teens to find content to consume. Sometimes, however, this era of abundance can feel like too much of a good thing; increasingly, Gen Alpha are looking to become empowered fans, asserting their agency by seeking out content on their own terms instead of having their tastes dictated to them by platforms' algorithms.

METHODOLOGY

STORY ARCHIVE ANALYSIS

In conducting this research, NRG and Young Storytellers set out to center the voices of young people themselves—looking at how they express themselves creatively to understand the values that matter to them and the way they see the world.

To facilitate this, we turned to Young Storytellers' archive: a digitized library of 7,241 stories written by children participating in the organization's program over the past two decades. Young people participating in this program were given the opportunity to explore their lives, feelings, and surroundings through fiction, supported by a standardized curriculum aligned with state and national standards.

By using artificial intelligence to read through these stories and identify key themes and features, we were able to explore changes over time within this archive that illustrate how the experience of growing up has been reshaped by the cultural and technological forces of the 21st century.

While these stories represent only one specific set of kids and teens' experiences—most of them were written by children in the 5th to 12th grades living in the Los Angeles area—the scale, consistency, and historical depth of this archive presents a truly unique opportunity to explore and unpack the evolving narrative of childhood.
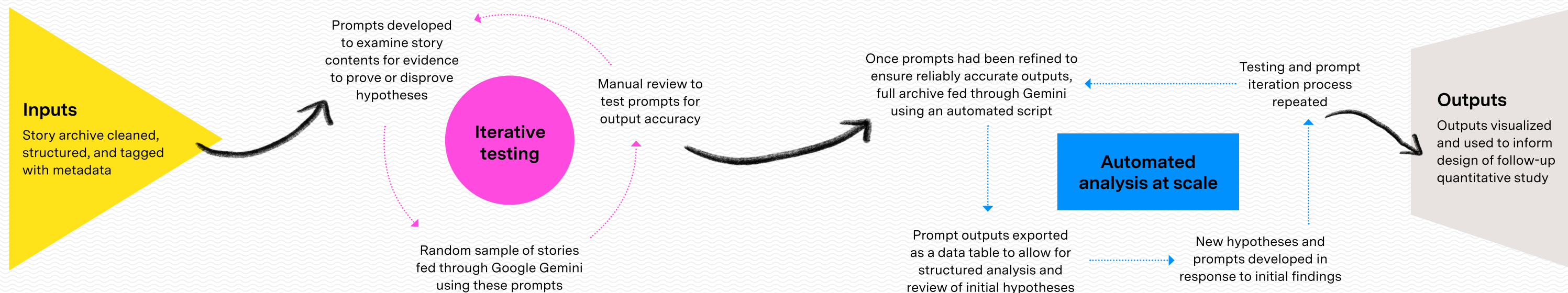
QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Insights from this analysis of Young Storytellers' archive were then used to inform the design of an in-depth study of kids, teens, and their parents, aimed at quantifying their media consumption habits and identifying the unique traits that define how today's kids and teens understand the world and their place in it.

This phase of research consisted of a quantitative study of 1,500 kids and teens (750 aged 6 to 12 and 750 aged 13 to 17) as well as 500 parents of children aged 12 and under. This study was conducted online in December 2024; respondents were selected and weighted to reflect the racial breakdown of these audiences based on latest available US census data.
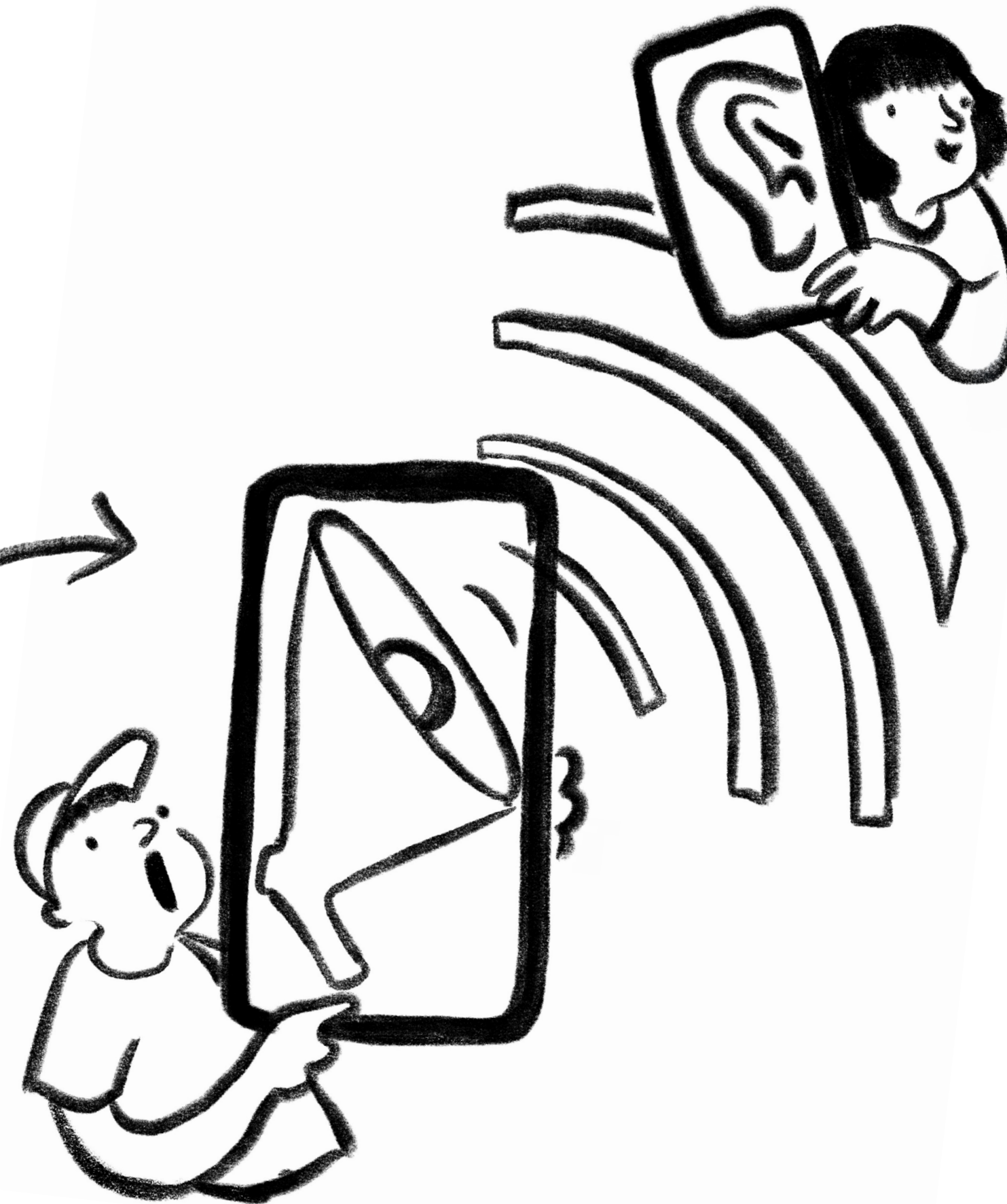
Unless otherwise specified, the data cited in this report has been drawn from this study. Footnotes have been included to identify additional data sources (including other research programs and syndicated products developed by NRG).

Inputs
Story archive cleaned, structured, and tagged with metadata

Prompts developed to examine story contents for evidence to prove or disprove hypotheses

Iterative testing

Manual review to test prompts for output accuracy

Random sample of stories fed through Google Gemini using these prompts

Once prompts had been refined to ensure reliably accurate outputs, full archive fed through Gemini using an automated script

Automated analysis at scale

Prompt outputs exported as a data table to allow for structured analysis and review of initial hypotheses

New hypotheses and prompts developed in response to initial findings

Testing and prompt iteration process repeated

Outputs
Outputs visualized and used to inform design of follow-up quantitative study

1

Life mediated by tech

1 For today's kids and teens, technology plays a central role in how they understand the world and build their communities, and is the primary vehicle through which they maintain and deepen their relationships with their peers.

2 Overall, young people remain broadly optimistic about the potential for technology to make the world a better place—although boys tend to be more positive in their outlook than girls.

3 Much of Gen Alpha's reliance on technology can be attributed to the challenges young people now face in finding safe venues for real-world socialization. As they grow up, today's kids and teens will be looking for opportunities to reassert the value of connecting with others face-to-face.

4 Young people have enthusiastically embraced AI as a tool for finding information and learning new skills—although many of their parents have concerns about the technology's long-term impacts on childhood development.

5 Kids and teens are broadly critical of the way that their use of technology is currently depicted in movies and TV shows, and would like to see storytellers make an effort to tell more grounded and more nuanced stories about social media.

For today's kids, the digital world is the medium through which they maintain relationships

It's impossible to discuss the experiences and priorities of today's young people without acknowledging the role of technology in their lives. Indeed, the idea of Gen Alpha as uniquely dependent on smartphones, tablets, and other electronic devices is so widespread as to be almost cliché—to the point that "iPad kid" has become a common term of derision applied to children born and raised in the 2010s.[1]

It's certainly true that the last two decades have seen a steady increase in the amount of time kids and teens spend in front of screens. One study by Common Sense Media found that, by 2021, daily entertainment screen use among teenagers had risen to an average of eight hours and 39 minutes—an increase of almost two hours in a span of just six years. [2] A 2024 study by Pew Research Center, meanwhile, found that 46% of teens now use the internet "almost constantly." [3]

This constant connection to the digital world is facilitated by the near-ubiquity of smartphone ownership among today's teenagers; only around 1-in-20 teens do not have access to one. And while smartphone access is more limited among kids aged six to 12, that's only because more children in this age range are using tablets instead. For many parents, giving young children access to a tablet has now become the go-to way of keeping them entertained while at home or traveling.[4] Sixty-four percent of parents surveyed for this research said that they would be comfortable allowing their kids to have their own tablet by the age of 10, while 31% would let their kids own a tablet by the time they turn seven.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of today's young people as hopelessly addicted to technology for technology's sake—scrolling simply for the purpose of scrolling. **Rather, these devices play such a major role**

in the lives of kids and teens because they fulfill a critical social purpose. They act as the connective tissue that binds them to their communities and wider social circles—digital tools that facilitate the creation and maintenance of real and lasting interpersonal relationships.

Without their tablets, phones, computers, and gaming consoles, kids and teens would struggle to maintain friendships. Aside from spending time together at school, almost all of the most common ways in which kids interact with other kids are now virtual in nature. In other words, hanging out in online venues like group chats and video game lobbies has supplanted in-person activities like going to the mall or the movie theater as the primary vehicle through

which kids spend time with friends after school and on the weekends.

And it's not as if this is a situation that kids chose for themselves. Rather, their migration to online spaces has been necessitated by parenting trends and shifting cultural norms which have served to limit their access to real-world social venues.
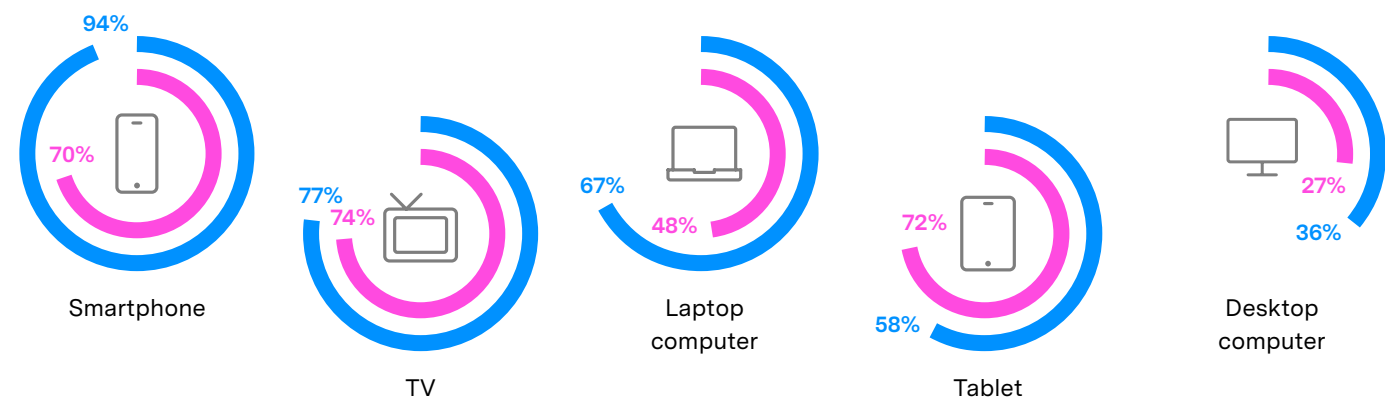
Over the last several decades, parents have become increasingly cautious about allowing kids to spend time without the supervision of a trusted adult figure. Similarly, many parents are waiting longer before letting their children sleep over at friends' houses—due, in part, to growing fears around child sexual abuse and the sway of the many parenting influencers who now promote a "no sleepover" policy to their followers.[5]

Conversely, the age at which kids are being given access to smartphones and social media has decreased significantly generation to generation. Notably, Gen Alpha is the first generation whose parents are giving them mobile devices before trusting them to stay home alone for an afternoon.

At the same time, venues for meaningful in-person interactions with other kids have become harder and harder to come by. Participation in youth sports, for example, has been steadily declining since at least the mid-2010s[6]—partly because of increasingly steep financial barriers to entry that have priced out many families.[7]
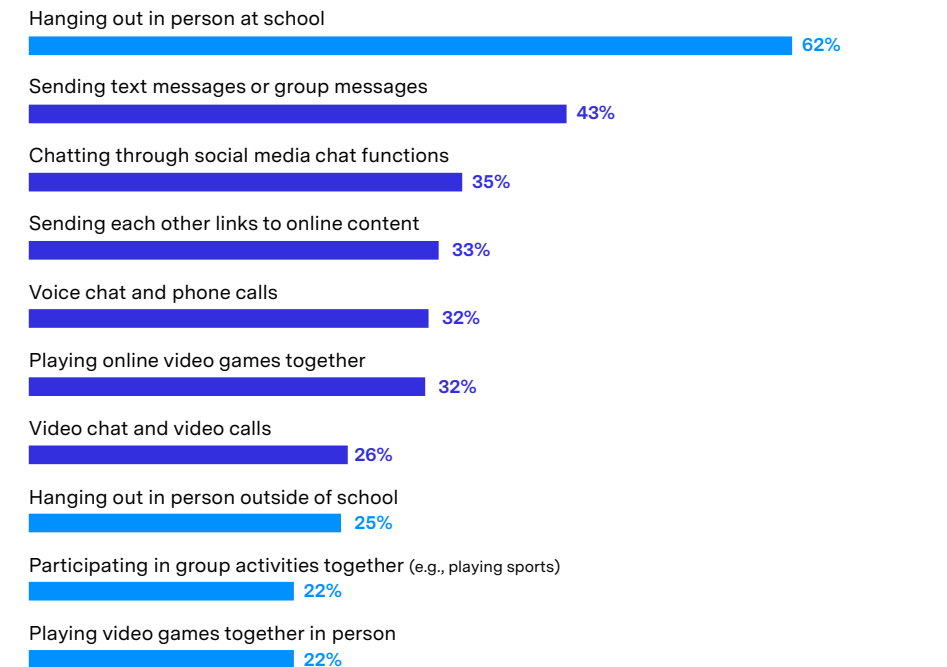
1. Eloise Hendy, "iPad Kids Are Getting Out of Hand," Vice, November 21st, 2023
2. Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., and Robb, M. B., "The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens, 2021", Common Sense Media, 2022
3. Michelle Faverio and Olivia Sidoti, "Teens, Social Media, and Technology 2024," Pew Research Center, December 12th, 2024
4. Brooke Auxier, Monica Anderson, Andrew Perrin, and Erica Turner, "Parenting Children in the Age of Screens," Pew Research Center, July 28th, 2020
5. Mariah Maddox, "How did sleepovers become the latest battleground for parents?" Motherly, August 30th, 2024
6. Derek Thompson, "Why Youth Sports in America Are in Decline," The Ringer, May 23rd, 2023
7. Jessica Grose, "Why So Many Kids Are Priced Out of Youth Sports," The New York Times, February 14th, 2024

Device usage amongst kids and teens
Percentage who report using each of these devices in a typical week

● Kids 6–12
● Teens 13–17

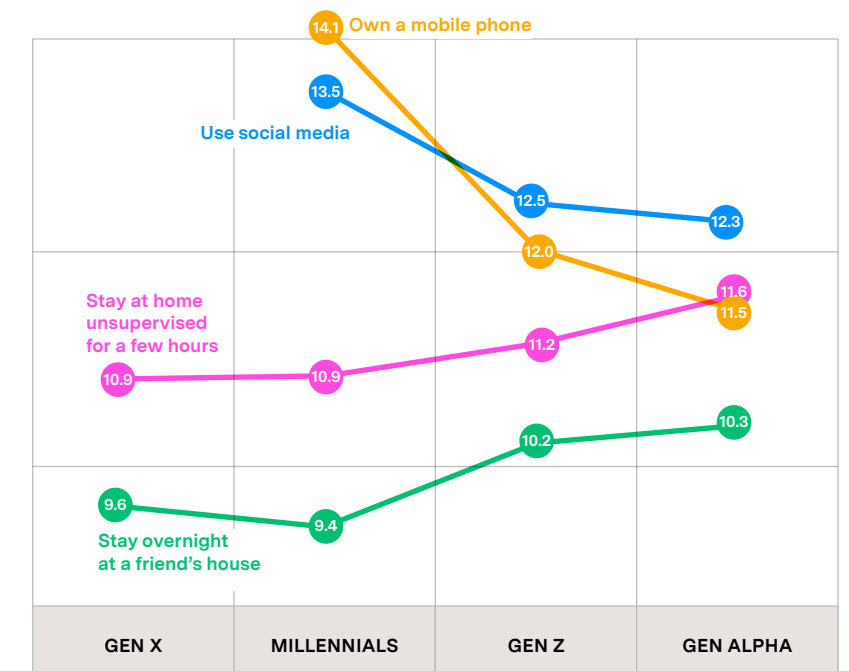| Device	Kids 6–12	Teens 13–17
Smartphone	70%	94%
TV	74%	77%
Laptop computer	48%	67%
Tablet	72%	58%
Desktop computer	27%	36%

How kids and teens maintain their friendships
Percentage of 6–17 year-olds saying they interact with friends this way "most days"

● In-person activities
● Virtual/online activities

Activity	%
Hanging out in person at school	62%
Sending text messages or group messages	43%
Chatting through social media chat functions	35%
Sending each other links to online content	33%
Voice chat and phone calls	32%
Playing online video games together	32%
Video chat and video calls	26%
Hanging out in person outside of school	25%
Participating in group activities together (e.g., playing sports)	22%
Playing video games together in person	22%

Mean age at which different generations were allowed to...[8]

	GEN X	MILLENNIALS	GEN Z	GEN ALPHA
Own a mobile phone	14.1	12.0		11.6
Use social media	13.5	12.5	12.3	
Stay at home unsupervised for a few hours	10.9	10.9	11.2	11.5
Stay overnight at a friend's house	9.6	9.4	10.2	10.3

Funding for youth clubs and afterschool programs, meanwhile, has failed to keep up with demand: between 2014 and 2020, the number of kids enrolled in such programs fell by around 20%, with the drop-off being most pronounced in lower-income neighborhoods.[9] Even many shopping malls—once the hubs of American teen culture—have now implemented curfews that severely limit access for unsupervised under-18s.[10]

We have a situation, therefore, where young people are being given access to digital spaces at an increasingly early age, while their access to the real-world is becoming more and more limited. So it's hardly surprising that kids and teens would end up seeing the virtual world as the primary arena in which relationships with their peers are forged and maintained.

While this trend was in motion well before 2020, COVID certainly did a lot to embed and accelerate it. One meta-analysis of academic research in this area found that screen time usage increased by 67% among children during the pandemic—significantly larger than the 51% increase among adults during the same period.[11] And while the world has opened back up, those periods of lockdown in 2020 and 2021 appear to have left a lasting impact on the lifestyles and habits of kids and teens.

In particular, COVID served to accelerate the digitization of America's public schools. Many of the country's

largest school systems spent tens of millions of dollars in pandemic relief funds on licenses for educational software[12]—with the result that many schools now structure lessons around the expectation that kids will be doing most of their work digitally.[13] Even in the classroom, kids are being pushed toward digital-first means of engagement and interaction, with more and more of their interactions with teachers and fellow students intermediated by technology.

We can see further evidence of kids' increasing reliance on digital methods of socialization by looking at the topics they choose to write about when given the opportunity to express themselves creatively. For example, analysis of Young Storytellers' archive reveals a widening gulf between stories about sports and stories about video games.

Back in 2010, kids participating in Young Storytellers' workshops were almost equally likely to reference these two topics in their writing. From around 2016, however, the gap between the two started to grow—a trend punctuated by a notable dip in sports-related stories during the pandemic. By 2024, kids were almost three times more likely to reference video games in their stories than sports, a testament to just how important online gaming has become for the maintenance of their social circles.

9. Jenna Doleh, "Why Are So Many Kids Missing Out on Afterschool?" The Wallace Foundation, March 3rd, 2021

10. Alexandra Lange, "Teens need malls. Malls need crowds. Why are they pushing kids away?," The Guardian, December 5th, 2023

11. Eun Jung Choi, Gabrielle K.C. King, Emma G. Duerden, "Screen time in children and youth during the pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis," Global Pediatrics, December, 2023
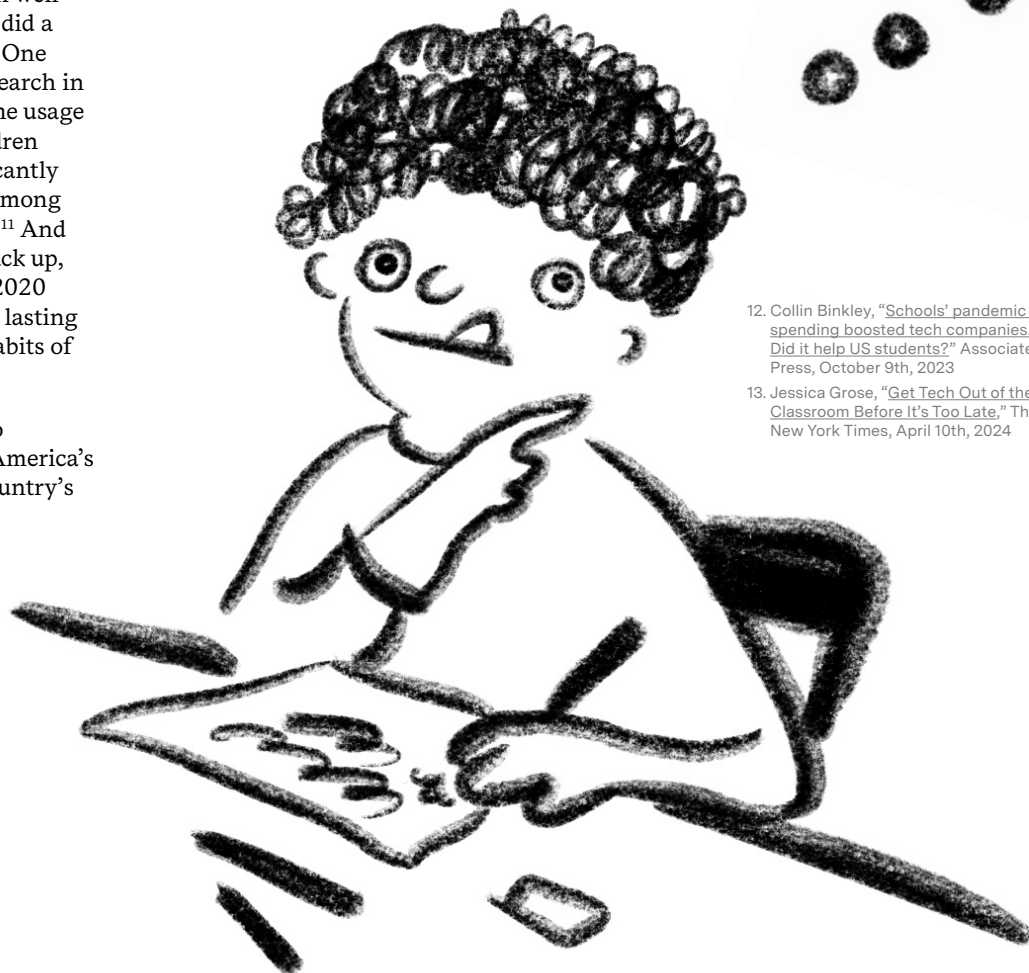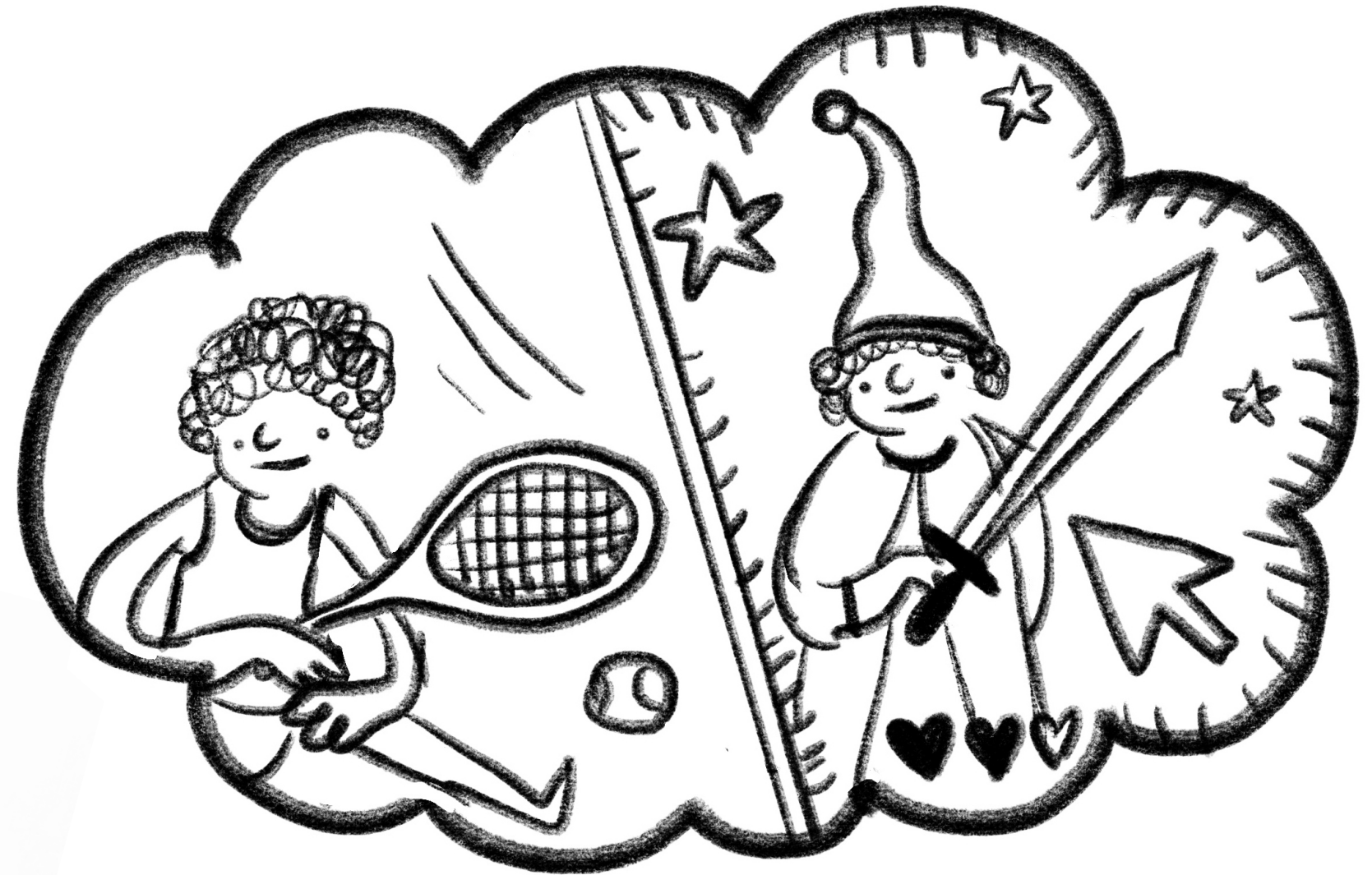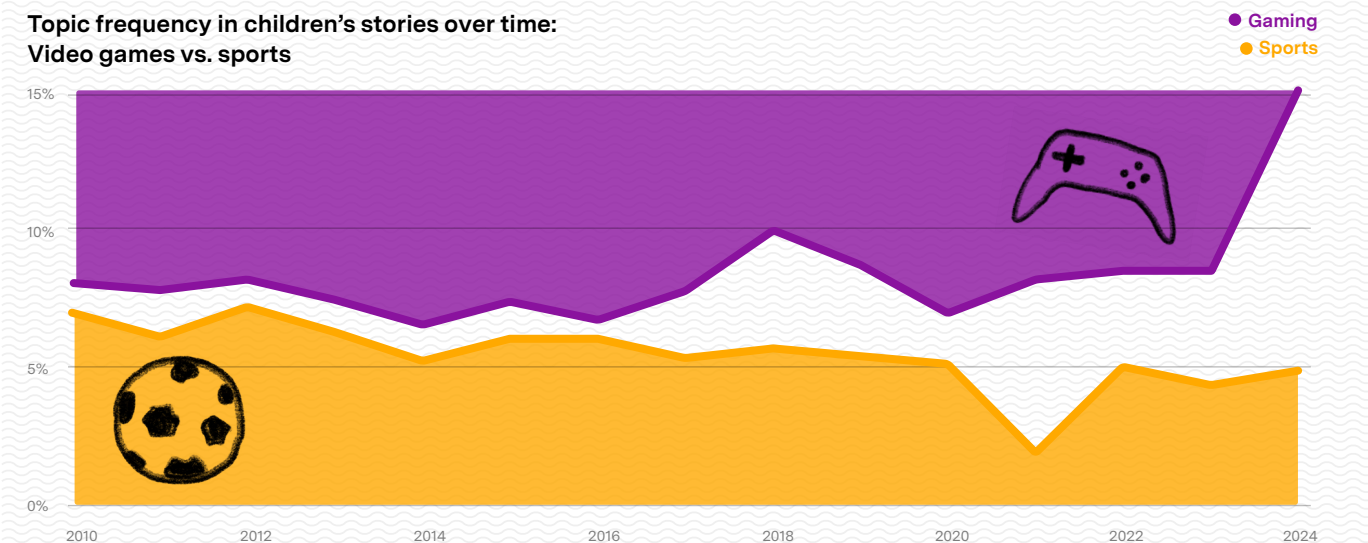
12. Collin Binkley, "Schools' pandemic spending boosted tech companies. Did it help US students?" Associated Press, October 9th, 2023

13. Jessica Grose, "Get Tech Out of the Classroom Before It's Too Late," The New York Times, April 10th, 2024

STORY ARCHIVE ANALYSIS

Topic frequency in children's stories over time: Video games vs. sports

● Gaming
● Sports

Kids and teens are techno-optimists, not skeptics

Given how much of kids' social lives now takes place online, it's easy to see why they would tend to have broadly positive attitudes toward technology.

Indeed, this attitude of "techno-optimism" among young people is one area where we see remarkable consistency over time. When kids write about technology in their stories, they tend to do so in a positive way—treating it as a useful tool and as a way of resolving conflicts, rather than as a malign influence or something to be afraid of. And that's remained true for at least the last decade and a half.

Overall, almost two thirds (64%) of kids and teens believe that technology is a force for good, helping to make the world a better place. Young people are particularly positive in their attitudes toward smartphones and tablets, reflecting the role that these devices play

as the primary portals through which they connect with their communities.

On the other end of the spectrum, kids and teens are somewhat more skeptical about the social impact of AI, VR, social media, and, in particular, cryptocurrency—although even in these cases, their views skew more positive than negative. Despite the volume of dystopian content that our culture has produced around these particular topics in recent years,[14] America's youth has yet to be convinced that their existence does more harm than good.

Not all young people, however, share this enthusiastic embrace of the role that technology plays in their lives. Analysis of Young Storytellers' archive also reveals a persistent divide in attitudes towards technology between the sexes. **Girls are less likely to write about**

technology than boys—and when they do reference specific technologies, they're more likely to frame them in a neutral or negative way.

In 2024, for example, 73% of stories by boys that featured technology depicted the subject in a positive light, compared to just 22% of stories by girls. And while last year was something of an outlier in this regard, it does appear that the gender gap in attitudes toward technology has been increasing over the past 10 years.

STORY ARCHIVE ANALYSIS

**Positive vs. negative depictions of technology in children's stories over time**

● Positive
● Negative
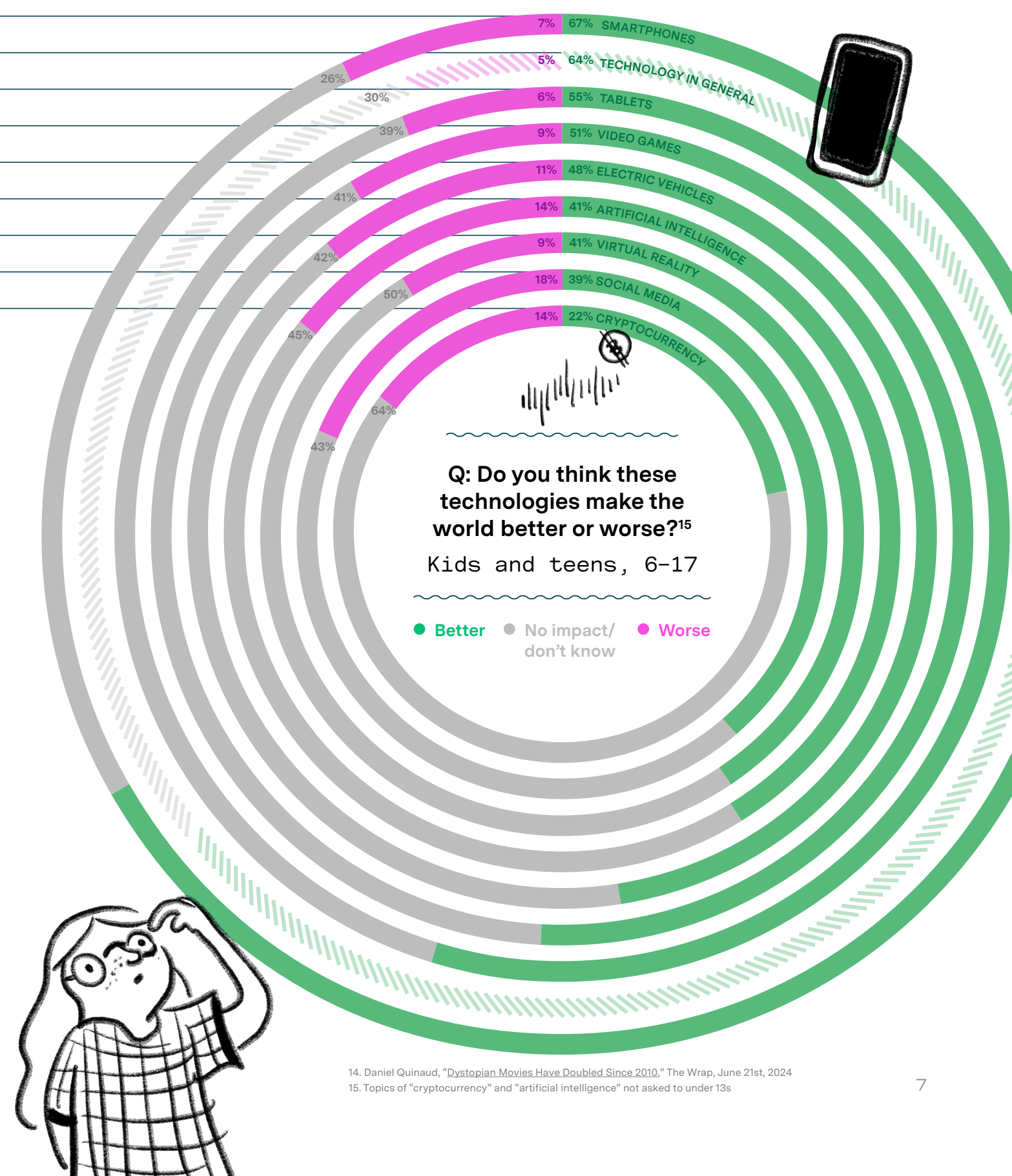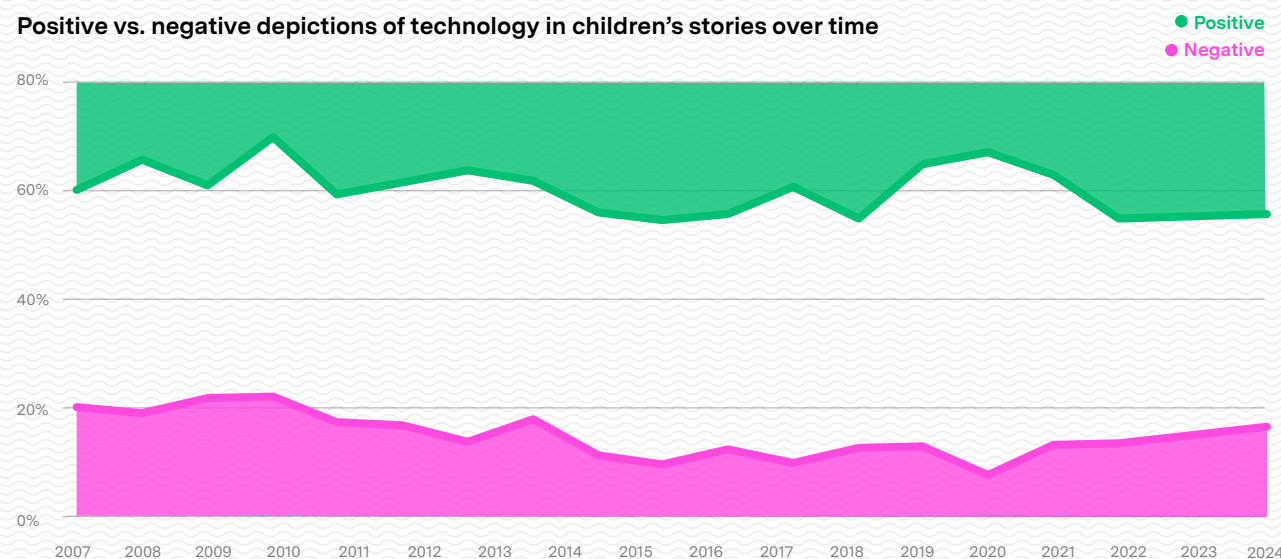
Q: Do you think these technologies make the world better or worse?[15]

Kids and teens, 6–17

● Better   ● No impact/ don't know   ● Worse

Smartphones — 7% | 67% SMARTPHONES
Technology in general — 5% | 64% TECHNOLOGY IN GENERAL | 26% | 30%
Tablets — 6% | 55% TABLETS
Video games — 9% | 51% VIDEO GAMES | 39%
Electric vehicles — 11% | 48% ELECTRIC VEHICLES | 41%
Artificial intelligence — 14% | 41% ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE | 42%
Virtual reality — 9% | 41% VIRTUAL REALITY
Social media — 18% | 39% SOCIAL MEDIA | 50%
Cryptocurrency — 14% | 22% CRYPTOCURRENCY | 64% | 45% | 43%

14. Daniel Quinaud, "Dystopian Movies Have Doubled Since 2010," The Wrap, June 21st, 2024
15. Topics of "cryptocurrency" and "artificial intelligence" not asked to under 13s

To an extent, this data reflects the fact that, for as much as gender norms have shifted over recent decades, science and technology remain deeply male-coded areas of interest. Globally, women now make up the majority of students in tertiary education, and yet they represent only 35% of STEM graduates—a figure that has remained stubbornly persistent for at least a decade.[16] As of 2021, only a third of America's STEM workforce was female, and women in these fields were consistently paid less than their male colleagues.[17]
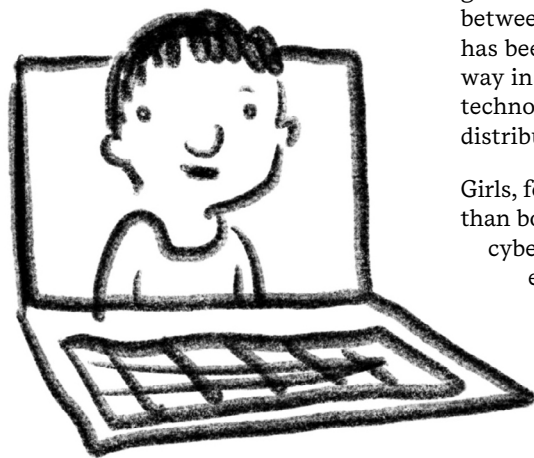
This analysis makes it clear that this particular inequality between the sexes is baked into our culture at an early stage: by their tweens, kids have already developed radically different perspectives on technology. Indeed, academic research suggests that, from as early as kindergarten, teachers and parents are unknowingly steering girls away from expressing an interest in STEM-related subjects.[18]

It's also possible that this growing gap in attitudes between boys and girls has been driven, in part, by the way in which the downsides of new technologies have been unevenly distributed between the sexes.

Girls, for example, are more likely than boys to have been the victim of cyberbullying.[19] Increasing rates of eating disorders, meanwhile, suggest that girls have been more deeply impacted by the unrealistic body image standards propagated by social media.[20] It's also possible that teen girls are more attuned to the potential negative impact of AI, given the number of high-profile cases in which the technology has been abused to create explicit images of women without their consent[21] or to aid in cyberstalking.[22]

16. Silvia Montoya, "New UIS data show that the share of women in STEM graduates stagnant for 10 years," UNESCO World Education Blog, April 26th, 2024
17. Kimmy Yam, "Trump's DEI policy threatens already thin share of women and minorities in STEM, workers say," NBC News, January 30th, 2025
18. Kim Elsesser, "Gender Bias In STEM May Start in Kindergarten, Study Says," Forbes, September 13th, 2024

STORY ARCHIVE ANALYSIS

Gender divide in depictions of technology over time
Percentage of stories depicting technology that do so in a **positive** light

● Male
● Female
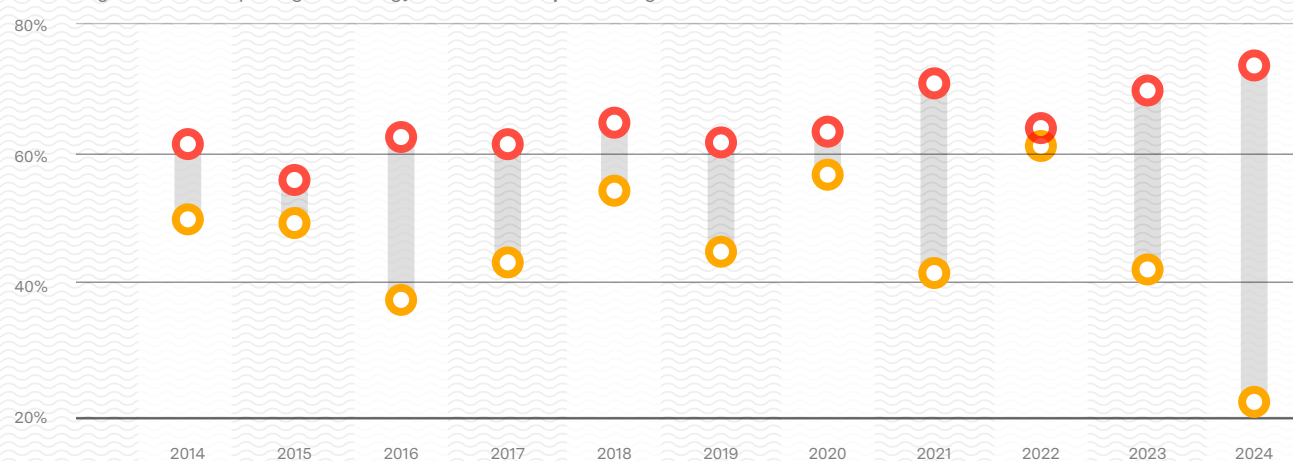
19. Emily A. Vogels, "Teens and Cyberbullying 2022," Pew Research Center, December 15th, 2022
20. Caroline Hopkins, "Eating disorders among teens more severe than ever," NBC News, April 29th, 2023
21. Nadine Yousif, "X blocks searches for Taylor Swift after explicit AI images of her go viral," BBC News, January 28th, 2024
22. Katie McQue, "A man stalked a professor for six years. Then he used AI chatbots to lure strangers to her home," The Guardian, February 1st, 2025

The AI revolution looks set to further reshape kids' experiences of digital spaces

Social media, tablets, and smartphones may have been the technologies that did the most to reshape the experience of childhood in the 2010s, but now that we're halfway through the 2020s, it's becoming increasingly clear that artificial intelligence will have a similarly transformative impact.
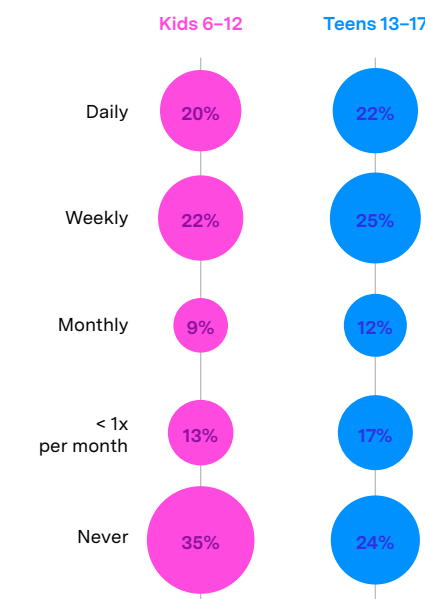
It's been more than two years now since OpenAI launched ChatGPT and ushered in the current boom period for commercial AI models and applications built on top of them. And over that period, younger Americans have proved to be enthusiastic adopters of the technology. Almost half of teens (47%), as well as 42% of kids aged between six and 12, say that they now interact with AI chatbots or voice assistants on at least a weekly basis.

By far the most common use case for AI among kids and teens is to help them find information they're looking for online. **In this respect, AI has come to fulfil a similar role for Gen Alpha as search engines did for Millennials and Gen Z;** where kids in the 2000s and 2010s would have turned to Google for answers, many of today's young people are instead looking to ChatGPT, Claude or other AI chatbots. Indeed, ChatGPT has now claimed a place as one of the top five most widely used mobile apps by teens and tweens, making it the fastest growing app among this demographic since *Pokémon GO*.[23]

Over time, this may lead to today's kids and teens developing substantially different relationships with online spaces. By the time they reach adulthood, prompting AI is likely to be second nature for much of Gen Alpha—and, as a result, they will expect the digital platforms and services they interact with to be able to respond to them in a fluid, organic, and highly personalized way. Services that don't offer some form of conversational interface will feel increasingly antiquated to a generation that grew up having back-and-forth interactions with AI models.
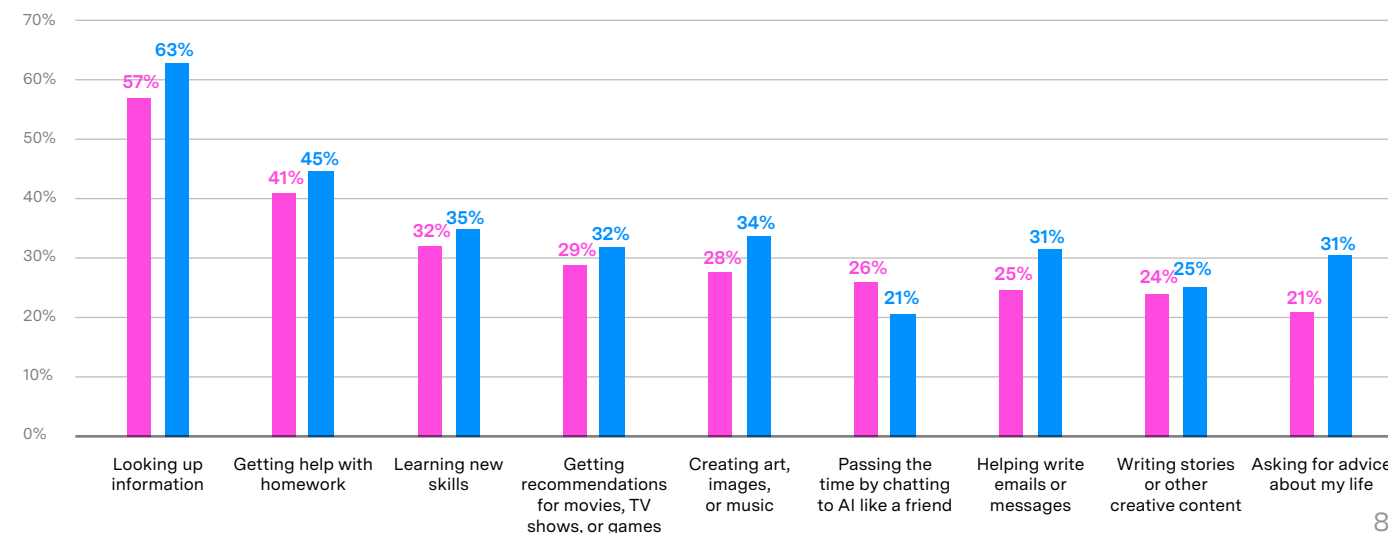
Q: How often do you interact with AI chatbots and voice assistants?

Kids 6–12 | Teens 13–17

	Kids 6–12	Teens 13–17
Daily	20%	22%
Weekly	22%	25%
Monthly	9%	12%
< 1x per month	13%	17%
Never	35%	24%

23. Ryan Tuchow, "ChatGPT has become one of kids' favorite apps," Kidscreen, October 25th, 2024

Q: How have you used AI chatbots and voice assistants?
Kids and teens who have used AI at least once

● Kids 6–12
● Teens 13–17

	Kids 6–12	Teens 13–17
Looking up information	57%	63%
Getting help with homework	41%	45%
Learning new skills	32%	35%
Getting recommendations for movies, TV shows, or games	29%	32%
Creating art, images, or music	28%	34%
Passing the time by chatting to AI like a friend	26%	21%
Helping write emails or messages	25%	31%
Writing stories or other creative content	24%	25%
Asking for advice about my life	21%	31%

Parents

Q: How will AI impact children's creativity?

- 34%
- 51%
- 15%

- ● "AI will encourage children to be more creative by making it easier for them to come up with ideas"
- ● Don't know
- ● "AI will reduce children's creativity and make them overly reliant on technology to express themselves"

Increased AI adoption among kids and teens will also have profound consequences for educators. On the one hand, the technology offers enormous potential to enhance kids' access to information and enrich their educational experiences—including through the development of personalized lessons developed and delivered by virtual teachers.[24] Government-funded pilot studies in India, for example, have demonstrated the capacity for AI tools in the classroom to streamline teachers' workflows, giving them more time to devote to higher value-add activities and supporting the students who need it the most.[25]

More broadly speaking, it's certainly possible that growing up in an environment saturated by AI tools and services will have profound consequences on childhood development that have yet to be fully researched or understood. According to UNICEF, the impact of AI exposure on early childhood development remains largely unexplored—but experts fear that it could have serious implications for the development of social, emotional, and cognitive skills.[28]

In particular, there's a danger that an overreliance on generative AI tools as a means of personal expression will sap the creativity of Gen Alpha. **Half (51%) of parents think that AI tools will lead to a reduction in childhood creativity**—emphasizing the need for tech companies to think seriously about the implications for kids and families when developing and marketing these types of products.
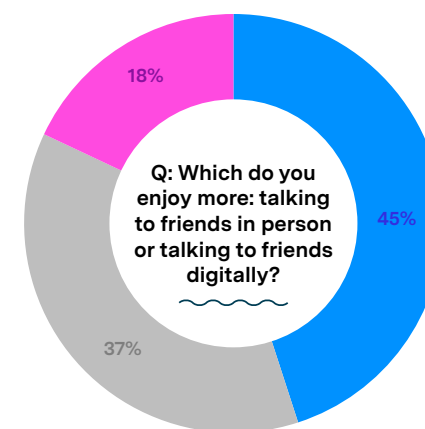
But at the same time, there are considerable risks involved. For one thing, many teachers have warned of an epidemic of AI-powered cheating, as more and more kids rely on AI to complete writing assignments or other pieces of homework.[26] Presently, 45% of teens who've used an AI chatbot (34% of all teenagers) say that they've turned to the technology for help with homework.

If young people become overly reliant on AI for basic writing tasks, there's a danger that they'll fail to develop the ability to conduct independent research or properly structure an argument. On the other side of the equation, it's possible that teachers—under increased pressure to do more with fewer resources—become overly reliant on AI tools for evaluating students' work, ultimately reducing the amount of human mentorship and feedback kids are exposed to.[27]

24. Cristian Randieri, "Personalized Learning And AI: Revolutionizing Education," Forbes, July 22nd, 2024
25. Dr. Avantika Tomar, "How AI is activating step changes in Indian education," EY Insights, January 31st, 2025
26. Jay Caspian King, "Does A.I. Really Encourage Cheating in Schools?," The New Yorker, August 30th, 2024
27. Ayça Atabey, "Shaping the future of AI in education: a call for a children's rights-based approach," LSE, January 30th, 2025
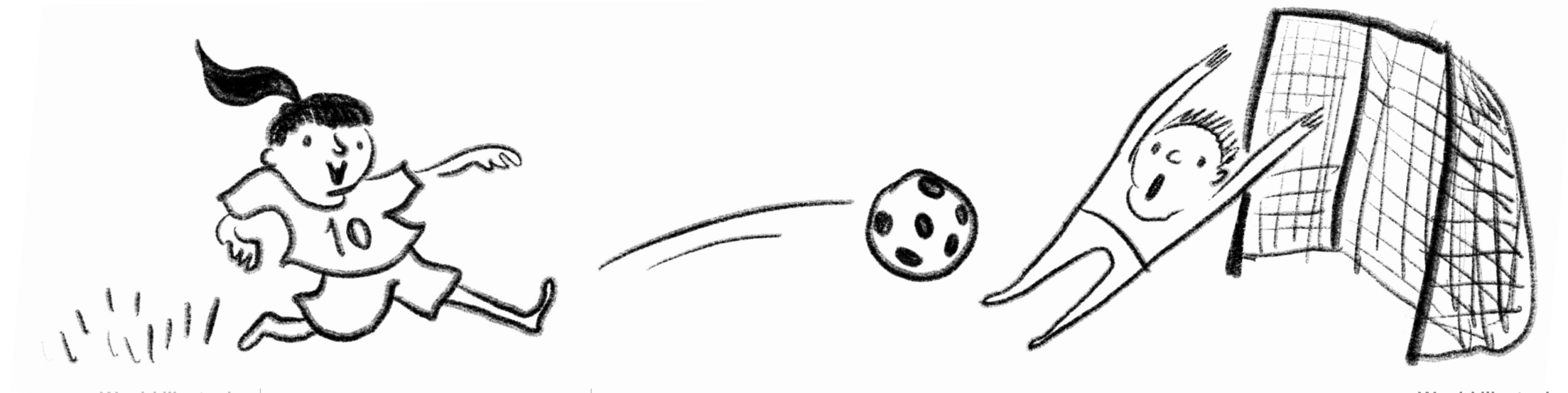28. "How is artificial intelligence reshaping early childhood development?," UNICEF, October, 2024

Despite their enthusiasm for technology, kids are keen to create space for more real-world connections in their lives

While today's kids and teens may have a broadly positive relationship with technology—they don't yet feel as if we're living in a *Black Mirror* episode—that doesn't mean that they're completely satisfied with the role that it plays in their lives.

Even though the majority of kids' and teens' socialization (outside of school) happens digitally, many of them prefer the experience of speaking to others in person. Almost half (45%) of young people say that they enjoy social interactions more when they take place in the real world—more than twice the number (18%) who prefer interacting with others through a screen.

Kids and teens, 6-17

Q: Which do you enjoy more: talking to friends in person or talking to friends digitally?

- 18%
- 45%
- 37%

- ● Talking to friends in-person
- ● Enjoys both equally
- ● Talking to friends digitally

Given these preferences, it's only natural that Gen Alpha would seek to dedicate more of their time to building relationships in offline, in-person settings. Overwhelmingly, today's kids and teens say that they'd like to spend more time hanging out with friends after school, playing video games together in-person, and participating in large group activities such as playing sports or going to the mall.

There's a disconnect, in other words, between what kids and teens would like to be doing and how they're actually spending their time. Young people aren't spending all their time online because they particularly enjoy the experience of interacting with others that way. Rather, they're doing it because it's their only option in a world where in-person venues for socialization—so-called "third places"—are slowly vanishing,[29] and

those which do exist are becoming increasingly inaccessible to children and teenagers.[30]

There's a sense here in which we, as a society, are placing an unfair burden on young people: we're simultaneously criticizing them for spending too much of their time online, while putting up barriers that restrict their ability to do anything else.

Despite the "iPad kid" stereotype, Gen Alpha are keenly aware of the value of in-person socialization. And as they enter adulthood and gain access to more opportunities for connecting with others in the real world, we should expect that many of them will seek to actively defy the expectations that have been foisted upon them—turning to technology not as a replacement for offline interactions, but as a tool for facilitating them.

29. Devika Rao, "The unfortunate, ongoing disappearance of 'third places'," The Week, March 26th, 2024
30. Michelle Goldberg, "The Internet Is a Wasteland, So Give Kids a Better Place to Go," The New York Times, March 18th, 2024
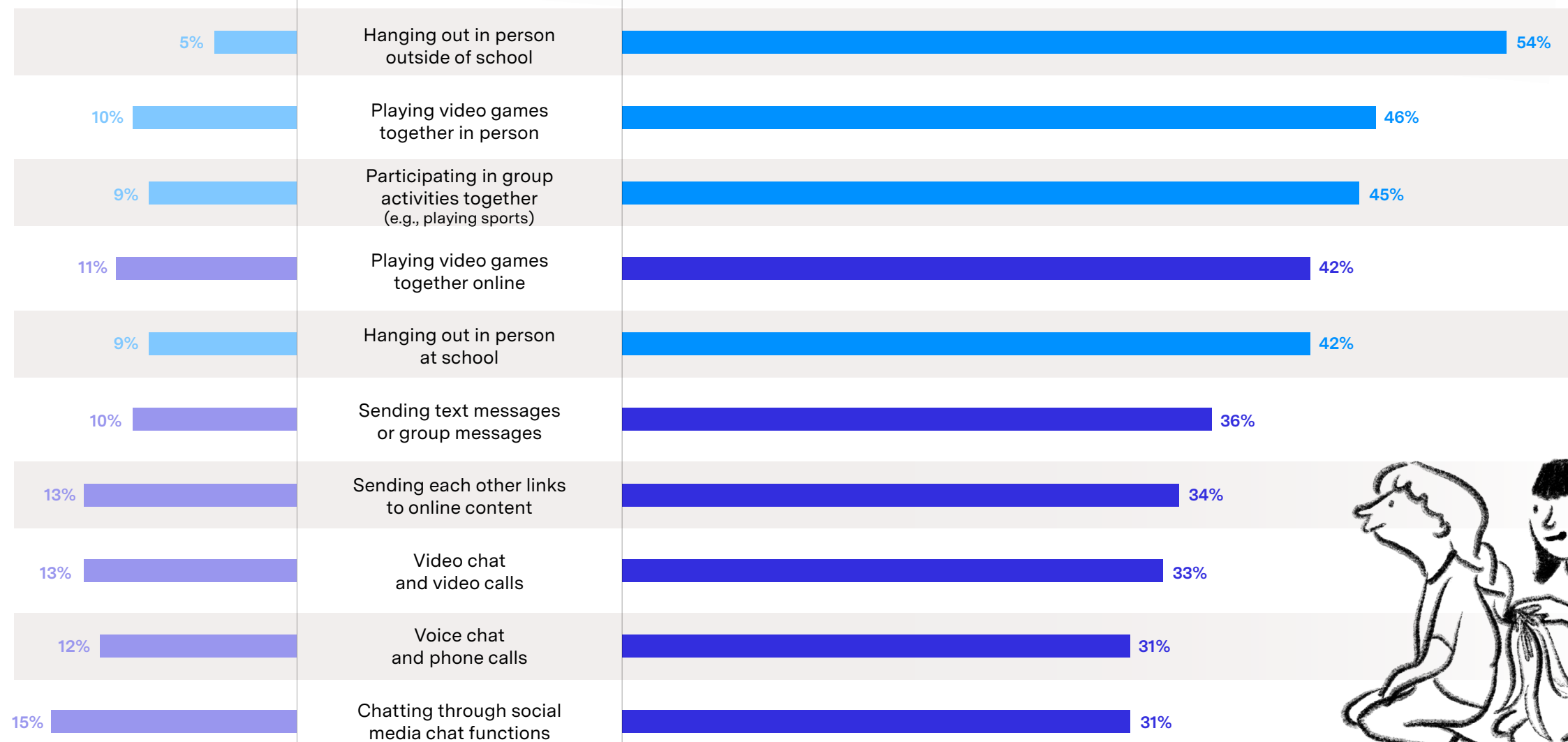
How kids and teens would like to interact with their friends in the future

- ● In-person activities
- ● Virtual/online activities

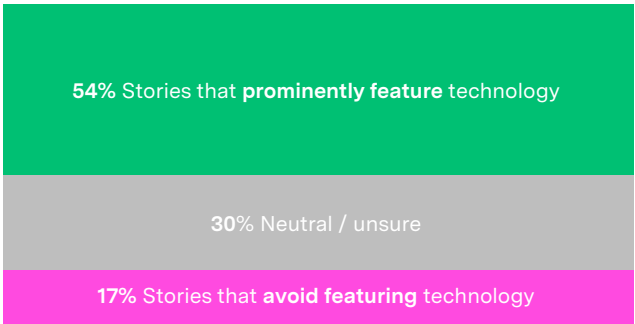|	Would like to do <u>less</u> of this		Would like to do <u>more</u> of this
Hanging out in person outside of school	5%		54%
Playing video games together in person	10%		46%
Participating in group activities together (e.g., playing sports)	9%		45%
Playing video games together online	11%		42%
Hanging out in person at school	9%		42%
Sending text messages or group messages	10%		36%
Sending each other links to online content	13%		34%
Video chat and video calls	13%		33%
Voice chat and phone calls	12%		31%
Chatting through social media chat functions	15%		31%

10

Given its importance in their lives, Hollywood needs to do a better job of portraying how young people engage with technology

For better or for worse, technologies—from social media to AI—have become an essential part of how kids and teens navigate the world and manage their social circles. Content aimed at this demographic, therefore, needs to reflect this reality, or else it risks coming across as fundamentally inauthentic.

Most kids and teens (54%) say that they prefer watching movies and TV shows in which technology plays an important role over those that deliberately eschew the topic. Very few, however, feel that mainstream movies and TV shows are doing a particularly good job of accurately portraying the realities of how people their age interact with technology day-to-day. In particular, fewer than a third believe that Hollywood really knows how to tell stories about kids and teens using social media. A recent study by UCLA's Center for Scholars and Storytellers, meanwhile, found that almost half of adolescents "cringe" when they see social media depicted in film or TV.[31]

When asked about what, specifically, movies and TV shows tend to get wrong about the experience of growing up in our modern era, many of the kids and teens surveyed for this research said that they resented the fact that social media is so often portrayed in a highly negative light.

Content preferences for movies and TV shows
Kids and teens, 6–17

54% Stories that **prominently feature** technology

30% Neutral / unsure

17% Stories that **avoid featuring** technology

Storylines about social media, they felt, too often revolve around issues like addiction, cyberbullying, and catfishing—and rarely explore the positive ways in which social media platforms can help young people develop a sense of their own identity and build their own communities.

Given how many of their interactions with others are intermediated by technology, it's understandable that young people would want to see that experience reflected back to them in the content they consume. This, however, creates something of a challenge for directors and screenwriters.

Scrolling through a social media feed is not a particularly visually interesting activity—and can, therefore, be difficult to translate to the screen. And given how frequently social media platforms change their interfaces—and how rapidly platforms can fall in and out of favor among young people—creatives may worry that featuring them too heavily will lead to content q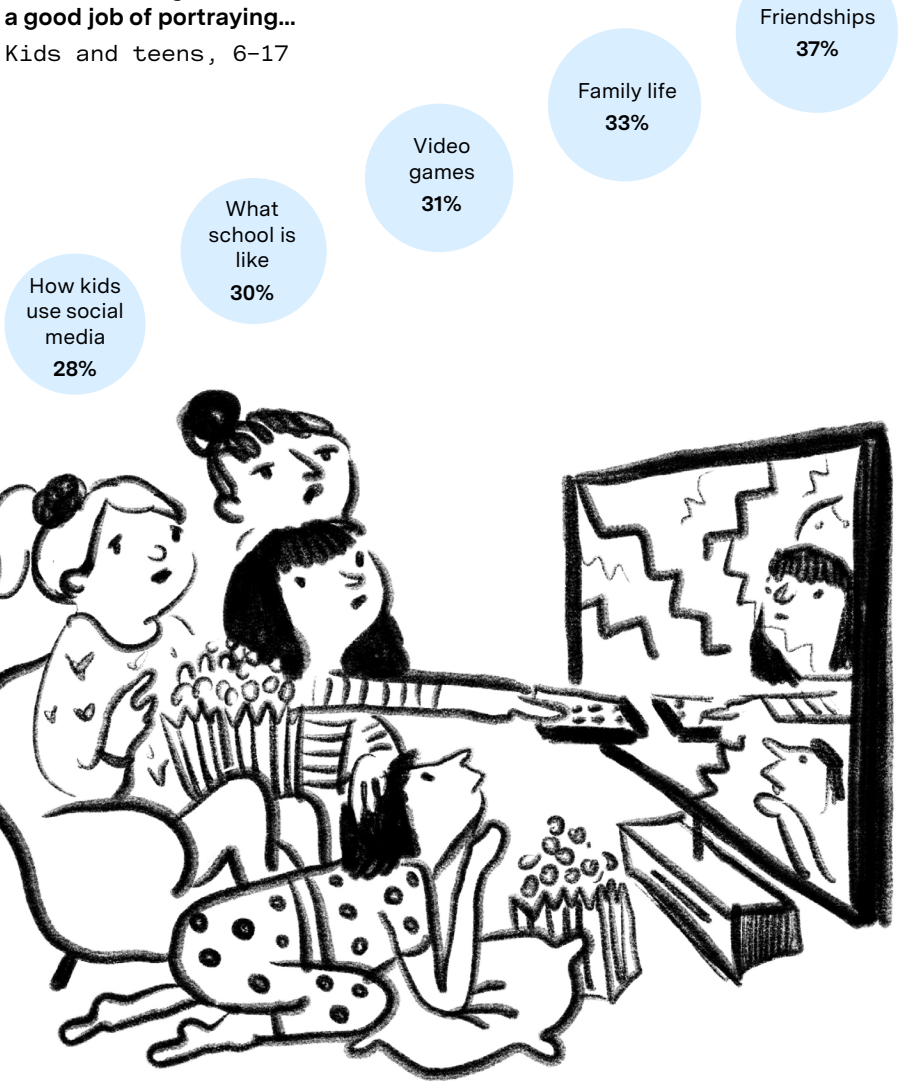uickly feeling dated or irrelevant. The omnipresence of smartphones, meanwhile, can make it difficult to build dramatic tension within a narrative;[32] almost every horror film these days now has to include a scene that explains why the characters can't simply call someone and ask for help.[33]

It's probably not a coincidence that two of the most popular depictions of childhood among Gen Alpha—*Stranger Things* and *Young Sheldon*—both sidestep this issue entirely by virtue of being period pieces. But clearly, there's a demand among kids and teens for more shows and movies that are willing to explore the realities of how technology shapes the experience of growing up in our modern world.

Bluey, for example, was cited by under-12s as a show that does a particularly good job of capturing the experience of contemporary childhood. And that's a show that frequently features storylines about technology—including an entire episode told through the medium of a video chat between Bluey and her cousins.

Euphoria, meanwhile, was identified by teenagers as the most authentic on-screen representation of their own experiences. While the show features plenty of stories about the negative consequences of social media, it has won praise from many younger viewers for its relatively nuanced and sophisticated handling of these issues.[34] Indeed, the duality of these online spaces could be seen as one of the series' central themes: for many of the characters on the show, they represent both a major source of their personal insecurities, and the mechanism through which they achieve empowerment and self-actualization in the face of those insecurities.

Q: Do you feel that movies and TV shows generally do a good job of portraying…
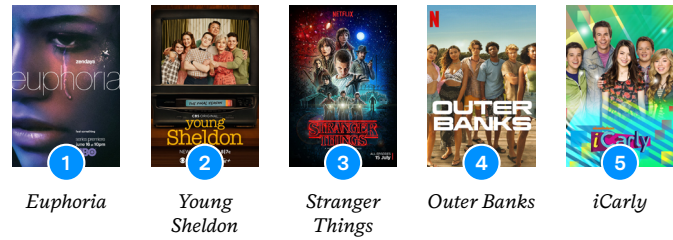Kids and teens, 6–17

Friendships **37%**

Family life **33%**

Video games **31%**

What school is like **30%**

How kids use social media **28%**

Q: What TV show most accurately reflects the experience of being a kid or teen today?
Open-ended responses

Kids 6–12

1. *Bluey*
2. *SpongeBob SquarePants*
3. *Young Sheldon*
4. *Stranger Things*
5. *The Loud House*

Teens 13–17

1. *Euphoria*
2. *Young Sheldon*
3. *Stranger Things*
4. *Outer Banks*
5. *iCarly*

31. Burrus, A., Rivas-Lara, S., Hines, A., & Uhls, Y.T., "CSS Teens & Screens", Center for Scholars & Storytellers, 2024

32. Daniel Kenitz, "Thrillers in the Time of Smartphones," CrimeReads, January 7th, 2025

33. Tasha Robinson, "Modern horror films are finding their scares in dead phone batteries," The Verge, August 16th, 2018

34. DeAsia Paige, "We Asked Teens If Euphoria Is Realistic," Vice, July 30th, 2019

2

A world in perma-crisis
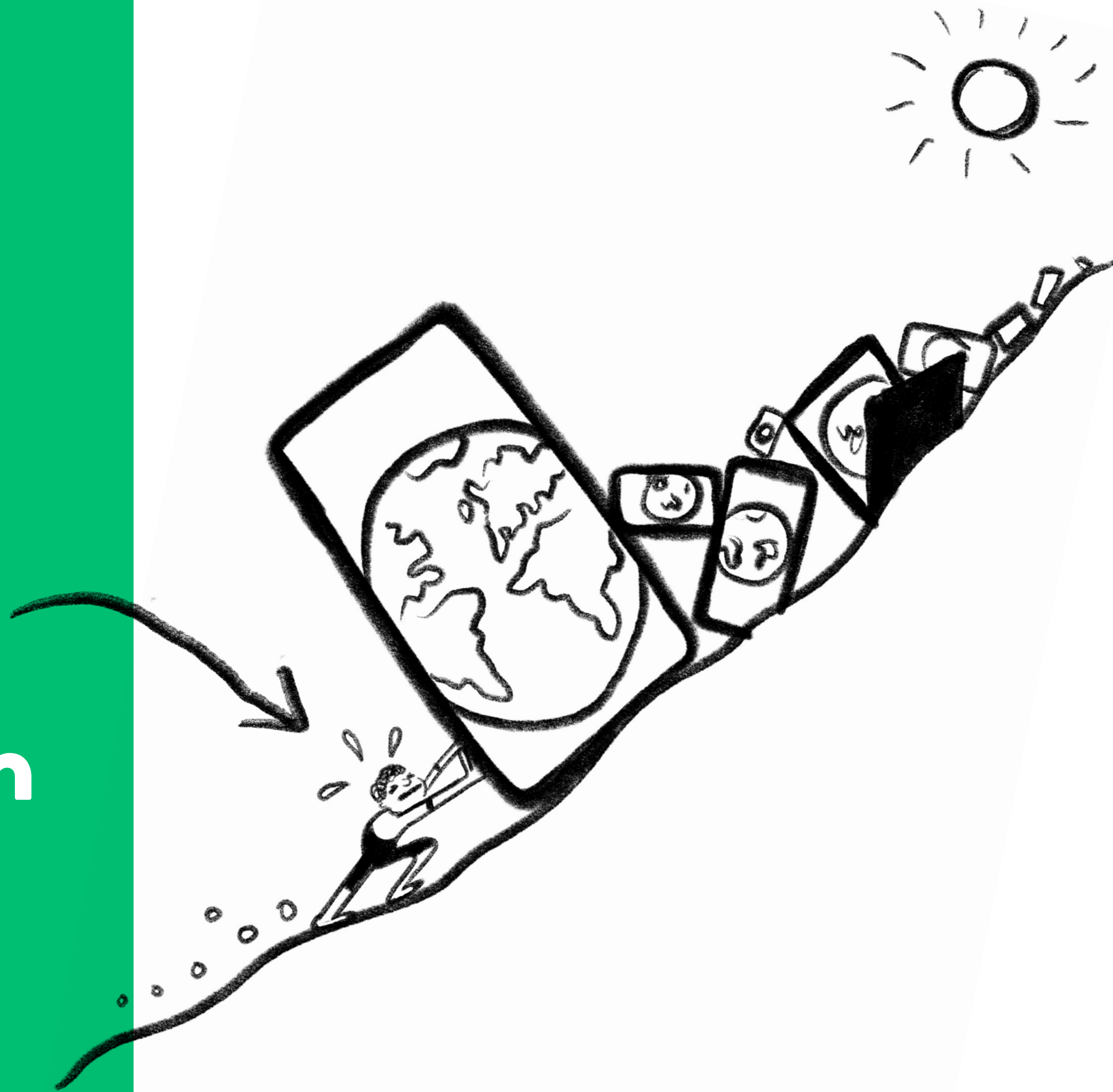
FIVE KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 Today's kids and teens are deeply concerned about the state of the planet they will eventually inherit. They believe that the world is rapidly becoming a more dangerous place, and they're highly conscious of looming threats like climate change and geopolitical instability.

2 The pandemic represented a key turning point in the way Gen Alpha sees the world, helping to crystallize and make visceral many of their pre-existing fears and anxieties.

3 At the same time, many of the concerns that kids have about the state of the world can be seen as an extension of their parents' own fears. Parents are deeply worried about the safety of their kids in online and offline spaces—and they blame social media for making it harder to raise children.

4 Because of their constant exposure to real-world disasters and crises, kids and teens show a strong preference for escapist fiction; they want to be able to lose themselves in light-hearted and morally unambiguous movies, TV shows, and video games.

5 But despite this desire for escapism, kids still need outlets to grapple with the major ills afflicting our society. Moving forward, the entertainment industry will need to offer young people narratives of empowerment and positive change that help cut against the currents of pessimism that appear to be increasingly common among Gen Alpha.

How kids and teens feel about the direction of our society

The world can be a scary place when you're a kid—and that's especially true for Gen Alpha.

Today's kids and teens have the misfortune to be growing up in a world defined by a series of interlocking long-term crises, punctuated by moments of extreme volatility and uncertainty. From public health emergencies and pandemics to the looming specter of climate change, from military conflict to the rising tides of political extremism and the constitutional crises they've unleashed, there's no shortage of reasons for young people to feel a deep sense of anxiety about the state of the world they're eventually going to inherit.

None of this is helped by the fact that we now live alongside a media ecosystem almost tailor-made to remind us of these kinds of existential risks. On social media, our news feeds algorithmically deliver us content that has been carefully curated to provoke an emotional response—amplifying the loudest voices and bringing young people face-to-face with uncensored videos of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and all manner of other calamities. Indeed, recent studies have demonstrated a link between time spent "doomscrolling" and feelings of suspicion, distrust, and despair.[35]

35. Sharlotte Thou, "Doomscrolling linked to existential anxiety, distrust, suspicion, and despair, study finds," The Guardian, July 18th, 2024
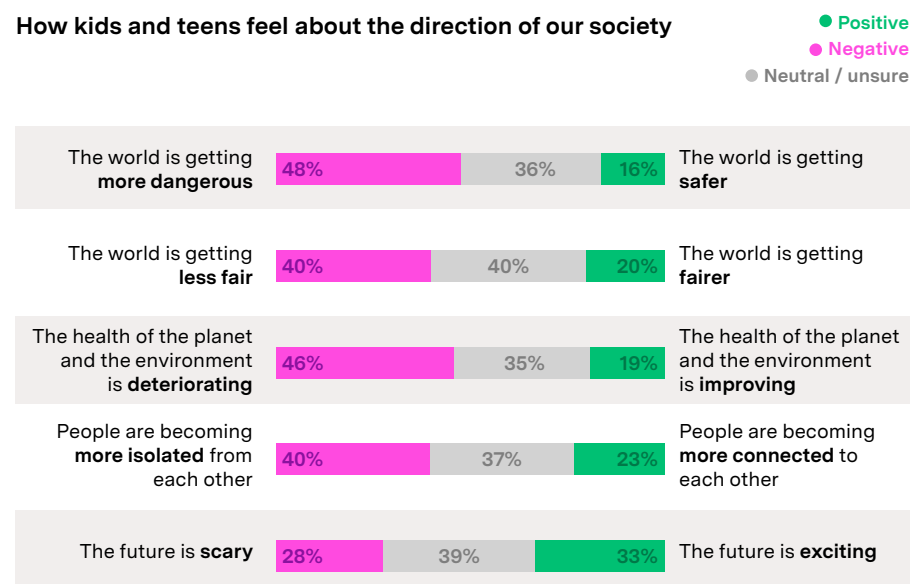
For young people, these factors have **conspired together to engender a sense that they're living through a period of "permacrisis"**—an era of history defined by a ceaseless lurching from one emergency to the next.[36] As a result, kids and teens now exhibit a highly pessimistic outlook on the future of our society and our planet. They tend to agree—in many cases, by substantial margins—that the world is becoming increasingly dangerous, that the health of the planet is rapidly deteriorating, and that our society is becoming both more atomized and more unequal.

While there are certainly plenty of factors that lie behind this sense of anxiety about the future, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have represented a crucial turning point. We can see evidence of this by looking at changes over time within Young Storytellers' archive—and, specifically, in the way that children tend to end their stories.

Throughout most of the 2010s, the proportion of stories with unambiguously positive endings remained relatively static, at around 80%. Around 2020, however, we see the origins of a distinct vibe shift: from this point onwards, the percentage of stories with happy endings begins to decline, falling to 66% by 2024. Conversely, a significantly greater percentage of kids' stories now feature ambiguous or even downright negative endings—an artistic expression of the prevailing mood of pessimism among younger Americans.

Arguably, the pandemic left such a lasting impact on Gen Alpha because of the way in which it crystallized and brought to life so many of their other fears and anxieties. For kids living in the US, concepts like war and climate change can feel somewhat distant and abstract: problems that affect people on the news, not their own families and communities. The pandemic changed all of that.

Suddenly, kids were given a concrete example of how global crises could upend their own ways of life. They saw for themselves how, almost overnight, you could go from hearing about a problem in another country to dealing with the fallout on your own doorstep. **Post-COVID, all of these other concerns that had previously been bubbling away under the surface suddenly felt more tangible, leading to a spiraling sense of fear and uncertainty among kids and teens.**

If there's one bright spot here, it's the fact that, despite all of these looming crises, kids and teens still believe—narrowly—that the future is more exciting than it is scary. While Gen Alpha are keenly aware of the scale of the challenges facing them as they come of age, they do not see them as fundamentally intractable, nor as reasons to give up all hope that a better world is possible. Rather, they view them as obstacles to be overcome—that *can* be overcome if their generation is willing to rise to the occasion.

How kids and teens feel about the direction of our society

● Positive
● Negative
● Neutral / unsure

	Negative	Neutral	Positive	
The world is getting **more dangerous**	48%	36%	16%	The world is getting **safer**
The world is getting **less fair**	40%	40%	20%	The world is getting **fairer**
The health of the planet and the environment is **deteriorating**	46%	35%	19%	The health of the planet and the environment is **improving**
People are becoming **more isolated** from each other	40%	37%	23%	People are becoming **more connected** to each other
The future is **scary**	28%	39%	33%	The future is **exciting**

STORY ARCHIVE ANALYSIS

Percentage of children's stories featuring positive and negative endings

● Positive ending   ● Neutral ending   ● Negative ending
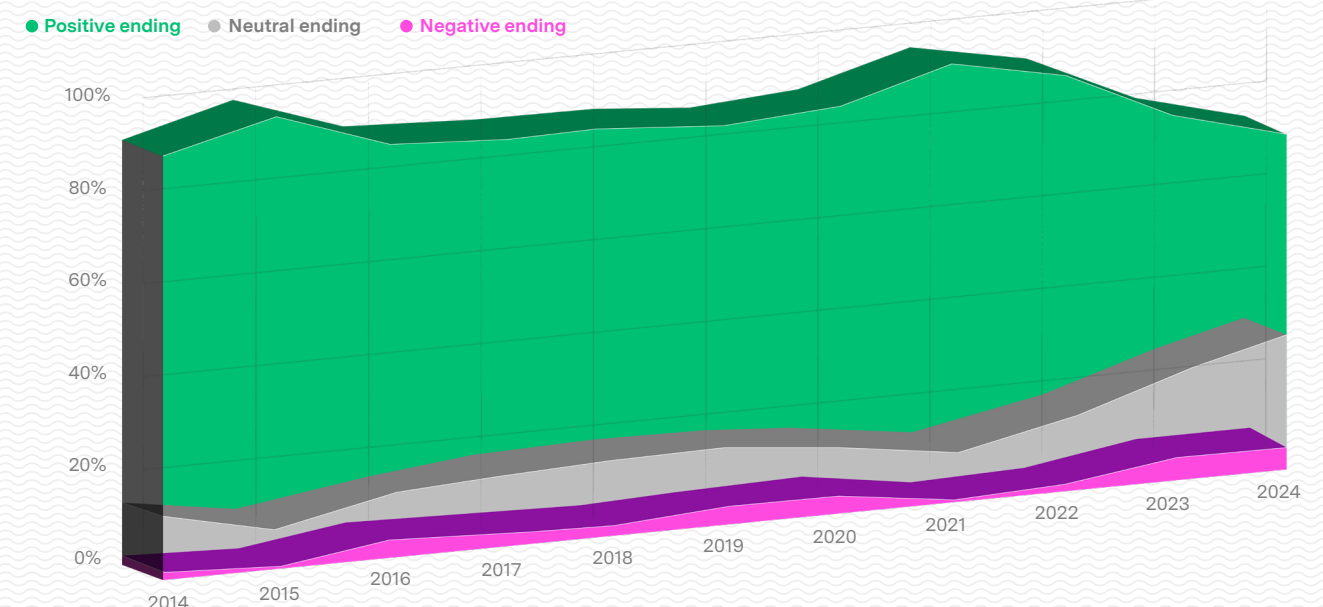
36. Mohamed A El-Erian, "Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World," University of Cambridge, September 28th, 2023

The fears that young people have about the future are often displaced anxieties from their parents

It isn't just kids, however, who are deeply concerned about the state of our world and its direction of travel. Overwhelmingly, their parents agree with them that the world is becoming increasingly unsafe: 65% of parents of young children believe that the world is more dangerous today than it was when they themselves were kids.

Arguably, this generalized sense of unease among parents may be contributing to the growing sense of dread their children feel about the state of the world; at least one recent study has found evidence of a link between poor mental health among parents and increased rates of anxiety and ADHD diagnoses among children.[37]

Moreover, parents' fears for the safety of their children are undoubtedly one of the major reasons that so many of them are now delaying the age at which their kids are allowed to spend time away from their supervision; nine out of 10 parents say that they worry about the safety of their kids in public spaces like malls, parks, and movie theaters.

Even school is no longer a safe haven for kids in the eyes of parents. The number of school shootings in the US has seen a sharp and tragic uptick since 2020[38]—with the result that gun violence has now surpassed traffic accidents as the leading cause of death for under-18s.[39] Consequently, over a third of parents now worry "a lot" about the safety of their kids at school, with 82% expressing at least some degree of concern.

Overall, there's a clear consensus among parents that the act of child-rearing is measurably harder now than it was for their own parents. And much of the blame for this, they feel, can be laid at the feet of technology.
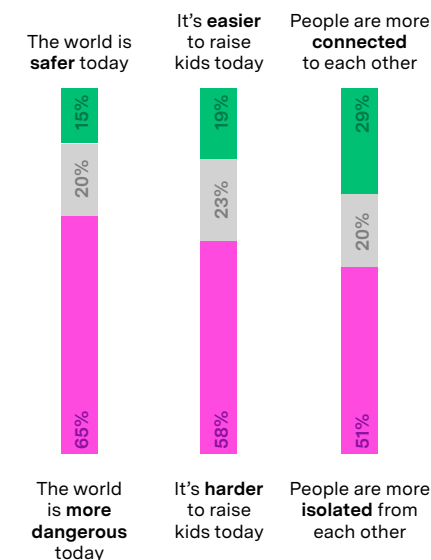
Social media platforms, in particular, are a major source of their anxiety. Parents today often feel as if they're walking a tightrope here—attempting to keep kids away from these platforms until they're old enough to use them responsibly, without isolating them or making them feel like the odd one out in their friend group.[40]

Similarly, many parents find themselves vexed by thorny questions about when to give their kids access to tablets, smartphones, and gaming consoles—and about what sorts of parental controls to set up on these devices. Often, these decisions are heavily impacted by peer pressure, as parents calibrate their choices in response to those made by others within their community. When the Australian government recently passed a wide-ranging social media ban for under-16s, they cited the need to remove this sense of peer pressure as a primary motivating factor.[41]

It's in this relationship with technology—and social media in particular—where we see one of the biggest disconnects between contemporary parents and the children they're raising.

40. David Remnick, "Jonathan Haidt Wants You To Take Away Your Kid's Phone," The New Yorker, April 20th, 2024

41. Chris Stokel-Walker, "Social media bans for teens: Australia has passed one, should other countries follow suit?," The Observer, February 22nd, 2025
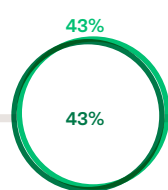
37. Dennis Thompson, "Study reveals parents' mental health impacts kids' risk of ADHD, anxiety," Medical Xpress, February 24th, 2025

38. Nadine Yousif, "Why number of US mass shootings has risen sharply," BBC News, March 28th, 2023

How much parents worry about the safety of their kids

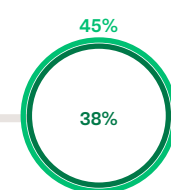- ● Worry a lot
- ● Worry a bit

Overall more worry
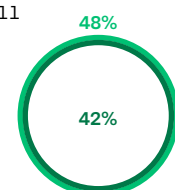
48%
42%
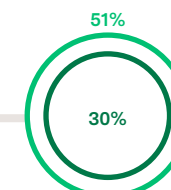When they're in public places like the mall or the movie theater

43%
43%
When they're on social media platforms

45%
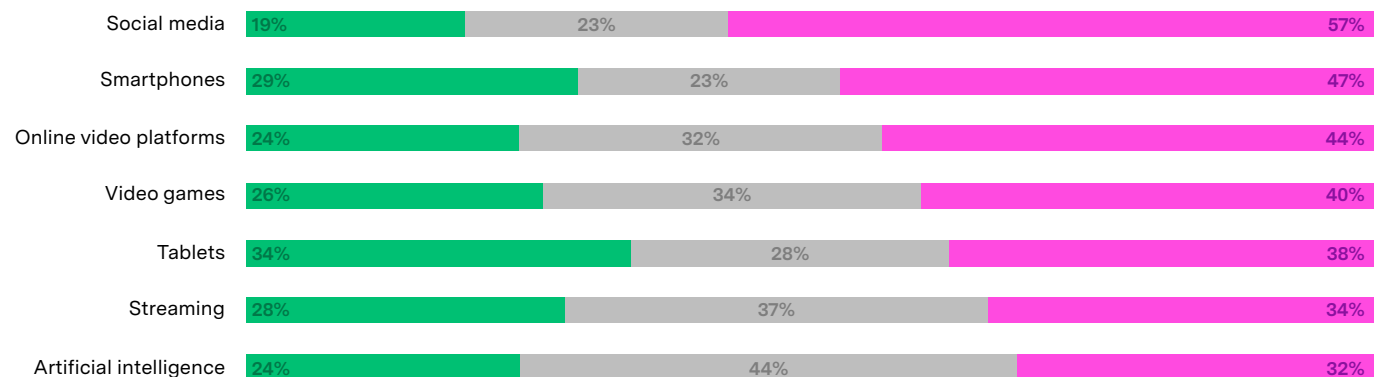38%
When they're messaging friends
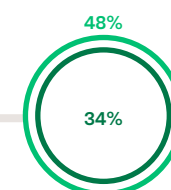
48%
34%
When they're at school

51%
30%
When they're visiting friends
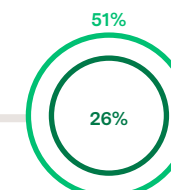
51%
26%
When they're playing online video games

Overall less worry
25%
14%
When they're at home

How parents feel technology has impacted raising kids

	It's made it easier to raise kids	No impact / Don't know	It's made it harder to raise kids
Social media	19%	23%	57%
Smartphones	29%	23%	47%
Online video platforms	24%	32%	44%
Video games	26%	34%	40%
Tablets	34%	28%	38%
Streaming	28%	37%	34%
Artificial intelligence	24%	44%	32%

How parents feel the world of today compares to the world they grew up in

- ● Positive
- ● Neutral / unsure
- ● Negative

The world is safer today
15%
20%
65%
The world is more dangerous today

It's easier to raise kids today
19%
23%
58%
It's harder to raise kids today

People are more connected to each other
29%
20%
51%
People are more isolated from each other

Kids and teens see their devices and social platforms as a force for good; they're deeply appreciative of the role they play in helping them maintain a connection to their friends and communities in a world that feels increasingly hostile toward in-person socialization between young people.

Their parents, on the other hand, have a very different relationship with these technologies. For them, childhood social media usage is the cause of, not a response to, social fragmentation and atomization. Whereas kids see these technologies as a vital lifeline to the outside world, for parents they represent yet another source of danger they have to figure out how to keep their children safe from.

39. Annette Choi, "Children and teens are more likely to die by guns than anything else," CNN, September 7th, 2024
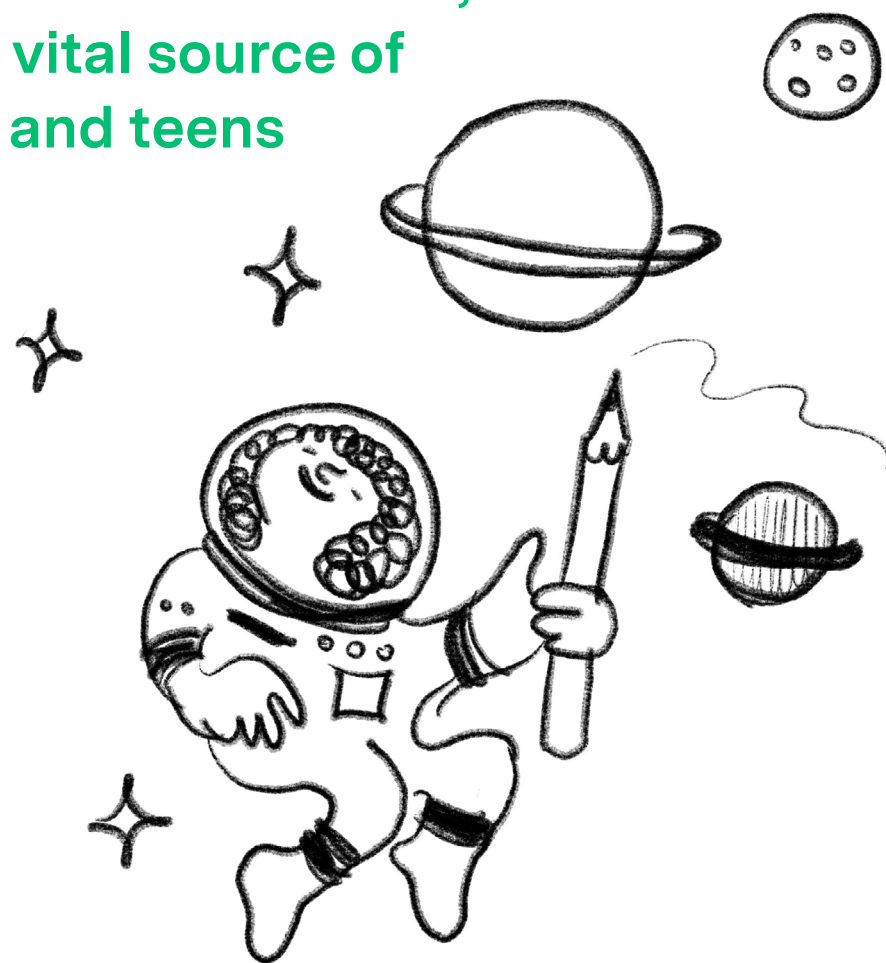
In an increasingly uncertain world, fiction becomes a vital source of escapism for kids and teens

Ultimately, the deep-seated anxieties felt by many kids and teens about the state of our planet have had—and will continue to have—a profound impact on the media they gravitate toward and the types of stories they seek out.

Specifically, they're prioritizing movies, TV shows, and video games that provide them with the opportunity to switch off and avoid thinking about the real-world issues that dominate so many of their thoughts and conversations. **Overwhelmingly, kids and teens say that they prefer content that allows them to escape from their everyday problems over stories that encourage engagement with real-world problems and concerns**.
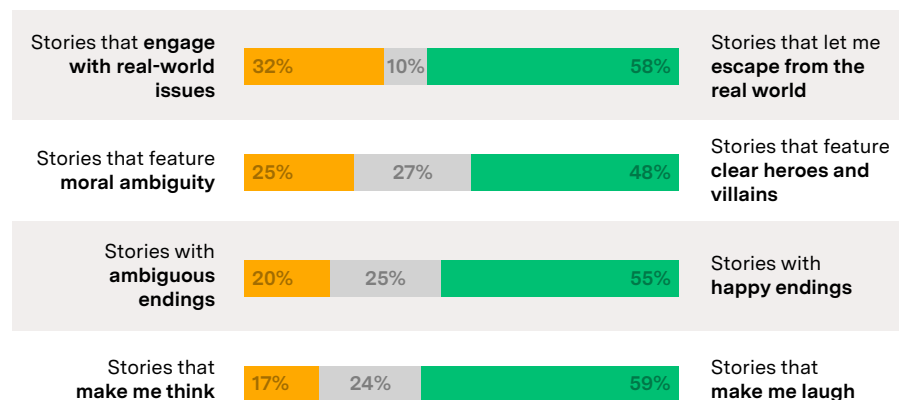
By the same token, today's young people show a preference for content that offers a vision of moral clarity so often lacking in the real world: they prefer stories that feature happy endings and clear-cut heroes and villains over those that dabble in shades of gray. They want unambiguous heroes they can feel good about rooting for—not the gritty anti-heroes that were so prevalent within teen culture for much of the 2010s.

To an extent, we see this desire for escapism reflected in the topics that kids themselves choose to write about when given the opportunity. Within Young Storytellers' archive, for example, there's a noticeable—albeit temporary—drop-off in stories that explicitly mention illness and disease in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic. Clearly, after a year of non-stop media coverage, kids weren't particularly keen to grapple with the topic in a workshop setting.
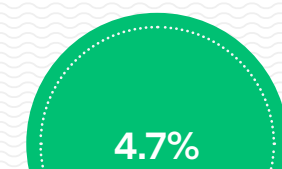

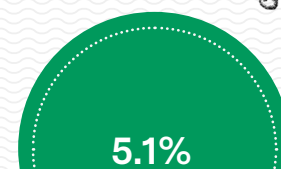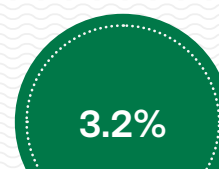### Content preferences for movies and TV shows
Kids and teens, 6–17

● Neutral / unsure

Stories that **engage with real-world issues**	32%	10%	58%	Stories that let me **escape from the real world**
Stories that feature **moral ambiguity**	25%	27%	48%	Stories that feature **clear heroes and villains**
Stories with **ambiguous endings**	20%	25%	55%	Stories with **happy endings**
Stories that **make me think**	17%	24%	59%	Stories that **make me laugh**

References to disease and illness in kids' stories

4.7%
2019

5.1%
2020

3.2%
2021

Similarly, today's young people are also fairly ambivalent about the idea of movies and TV shows doing more to shine a spotlight on hot-button issues and controversial real-world themes. Teenagers are almost evenly split on the question of whether they want to see more or fewer stories about topics such as climate change, feminism, and racial inequality; 43%, meanwhile, would like to see less media that explicitly references LGBTQ+ topics.

It's possible that these attitudes speak to an emerging "anti-woke" backlash among Gen Alpha—a rejection of media that feels overly moralizing in tone. Recent elections have demonstrated that younger members of Gen Z (those aged 18 to 24) tend to be more conservative in their political outlook than older members of their generational cohort.[42] So it wouldn't be surprising at all if members of Gen Alpha continue that trend when they become old enough to vote, bucking the liberal orthodoxies that defined the political views of Millennials and older Gen Z-ers.
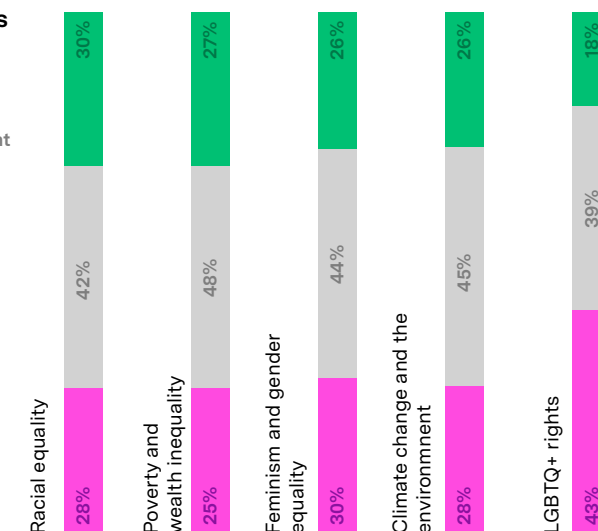
Equally, however, it's possible that these attitudes speak to a general dissatisfaction with the way in which these topics have previously been represented in media aimed at kids and teens, rather than an outright rejection of the idea that stories ought to address them.

As demonstrated in the first section of this report, Gen Alpha are broadly skeptical of attempts by Hollywood to translate their lived realities onto the screen. There may be kids, therefore, who would in theory be open to seeing greater exploration of these topics in media, but have found that, in practice, attempts to speak to these issues often come across as shallow, insincere, or overly moralistic.

Attitudes toward social themes in TV and movies
Teenagers, 13–17

● Want to see more
● Want to see the same amount
● Want to see less

	Racial equality	Poverty and wealth inequality	Feminism and gender equality	Climate change and the environment	LGBTQ+ rights
Want to see more	30%	27%	26%	26%	18%
Want to see the same amount	42%	48%	44%	45%	39%
Want to see less	28%	25%	30%	28%	43%

42. Noah Bressner, "America's youngest voters turn right," Axios September 28th, 2024

But despite their preference for escapist storytelling, kids still need creative outlets to grapple with the big problems facing our planet

It would be a mistake, therefore, to interpret the desire for escapist storytelling among kids and teens as a sign of a generation that wants to close its ears to the various challenges facing contemporary society, or which doesn't take seriously its own responsibility in helping to address these problems.

In fact, data from Young Storytellers' archive tells a story of a generation that is, if anything, more attuned to societal inequities than ever before. Since the dawn of the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements in the mid-2010s, the proportion of kids' stories featuring issues of discrimination and social justice has trended gradually upwards. Last year,

around a third of workshop participants mentioned these topics in their writing—close to double the percentage who did so back in 2016.

As kids and teens have grown more willing to explore issues of social justice in their creative output, they've also become more interested in setting their stories in the real world. Throughout Young Storytellers' history, kids have tended to set their scripts in sci-fi or fantasy universes. And while that's still the case today, the gap between realistic and fantastical stories has been gradually

narrowing since the mid 2010s—aside from a brief blip during the pandemic, when the need for escapist storytelling must have been at an all-time high.

This all puts entertainment companies looking to create content for Gen Alpha in something of a bind: how do you reconcile this generation's preference for light-hearted, escapist storytelling with their deep-rooted awareness of the various ills afflicting our society? How do you create content that speaks to the concerns that keep kids and teens up at night, without coming across as moralizing or overly dour and depressing?
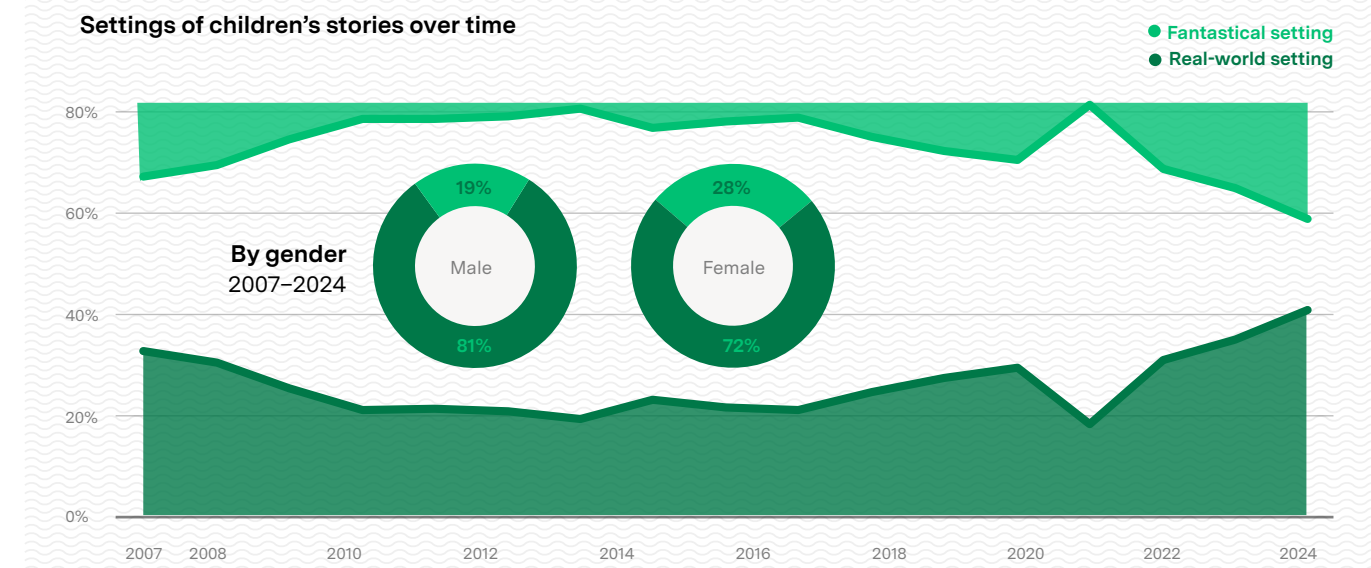
Settings of children's stories over time

● Fantastical setting
● Real-world setting

By gender 2007–2024

Male — 19% / 81%
Female — 28% / 72%

STORY ARCHIVE ANALYSIS

Topic frequency in children's stories over time:

Social justice and discrimination
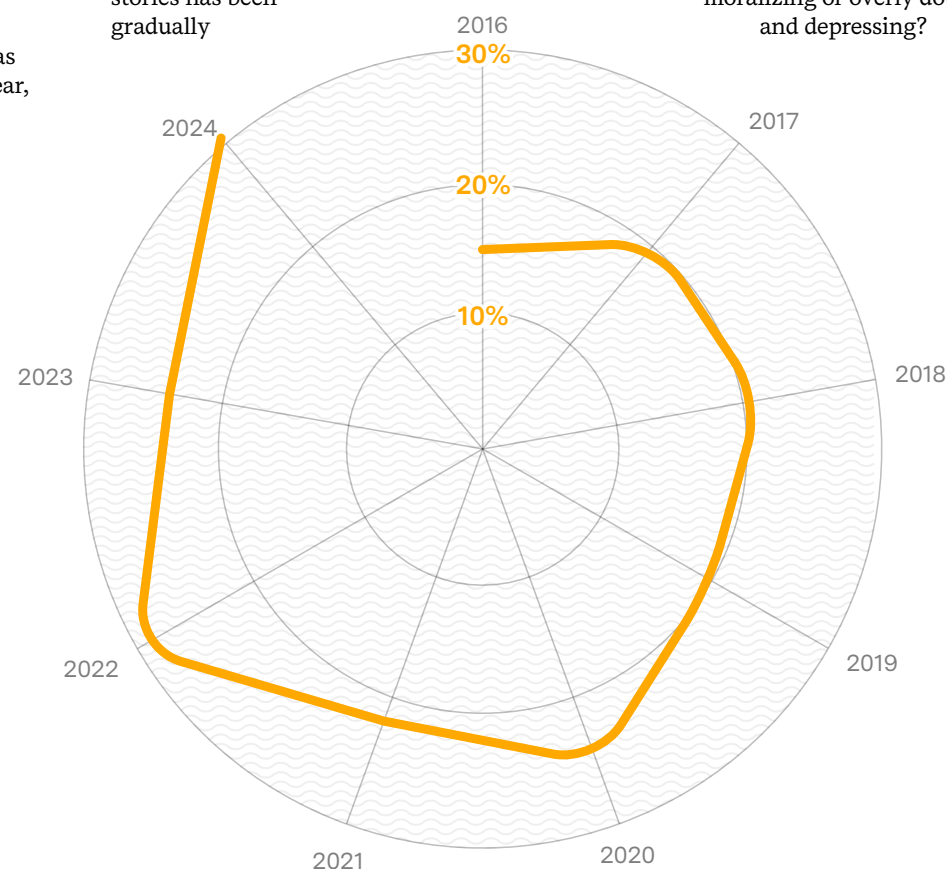
The answer may lie in the power of abstraction. Arguably, this is why dystopian fiction has long been such a popular genre among kids and teens: it provides a space in which to explore, metaphorically, pressing social issues, while also satisfying this audience's desire for universes they can lose themselves in and escape to.[43] Recent hit shows like *The Last of Us*, for example, speak to the potential to use the genre as a space to explore important topics like climate collapse, while maintaining a safe level of distance from teenagers' real-world lives and concerns.[44]

At the same time, it's crucial that media aimed at kids and teenagers offers them a positive vision of how young people can actually do something about our current cascading series of crises. That is, after all, its own form of escapism. It's easy to feel powerless when you're a kid—especially when you're surrounded by an endless stream of cultural messaging telling you the world is on fire. **It's vital, therefore, that media aimed at young people offers them a countervailing narrative of empowerment, emphasizing the possibility of progress and positive change.** Otherwise, we risk pushing Gen Alpha deeper and deeper into a spiral of pessimism and doomerism.[45]

43. Dana Stevens, "Why Teens Love Dystopias," Slate, March 21st, 2014
44. Yessenia Funes, "'The Last of Us': Where Mycology and Climate Apocalypse," Atmos, January 23rd, 2023
45. Liz Georges, "What you need to know about climate "doomers"," WWF, March 19th, 2024

3

Content overload

1 Gen Alpha is growing up in a world saturated—perhaps overly so—with content. Thanks to the streaming revolution and the rise of social video, it's easier than ever for kids and teens to find media that speaks to their preferences and interests, no matter how niche.

2 Social video content has become the default way of filling downtime for younger audiences—creating challenges for parents who worry about the impact this content is having on their kids' values and attention spans.

3 It's video games, however, that play the largest role in shaping today's youth culture. Social video platforms like *Roblox*, *Fortnite*, and *Minecraft* are continuing to expand their reach among younger audiences, offering kids and teens an important venue for building communities and expressing themselves creatively.

4 Today's kids and teens want to do more than just passively consume content fed to them by platforms' algorithms. Instead, they're broadening their horizons, seeking out library content and international imports and building a cultural identity around them.

5 Ultimately, this is a generation looking for a sense of agency and ownership over the franchises and stories they care about, pushing toward a new model of empowered fandom.

Thanks to the rise of social video, young people today are immersed in an endless stream of content

One of the defining traits of Gen Alpha, relative to previous generations, is their unique relationship with entertainment content. This is the first generation to have grown up exclusively after the streaming revolution and the boom in online video that took place in the 2010s. **From as early as they can remember, they've been surrounded by an endless ocean of movies, TV shows, video games, and user-generated content**—all of it no more than a few clicks away and available on exactly their schedule.

This level of content ubiquity, however, can be something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes it possible for kids and teens to seek out media that reflects their specific interests, no matter how niche—forming communities around hobbies, passions, and micro-fandoms. But at the same time, it can also feel overwhelming: when you have an entire universe of content at your fingertips, how do you find the stuff that truly stands out from the rest? How can your generation build its own shared sense of cultural identity when everyone's plugged into their own hyper-personalized media bubble?
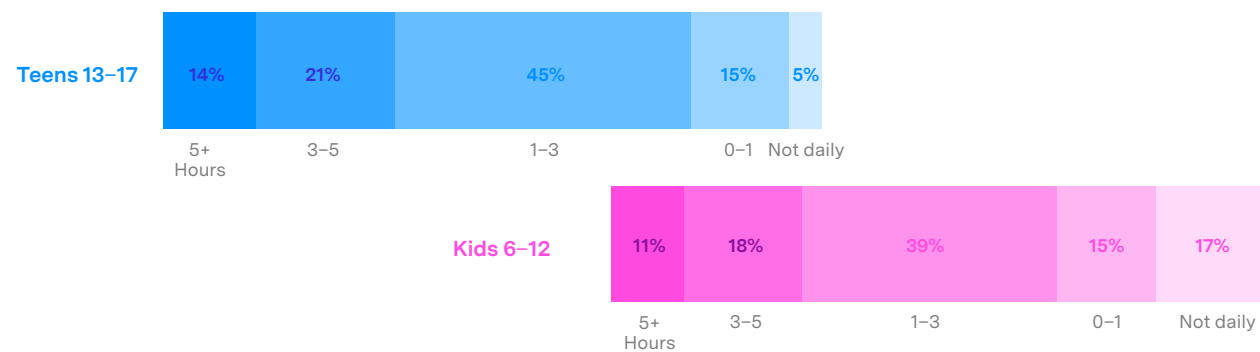
Within this ocean of content, it's social video apps like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram Reels that stand out as some of the most crucial cultural drivers for Gen Alpha. For today's kids and teens, it's these apps—not TV channels or streaming services—that are their go-to source for content to fill downtime.

Almost all teens (95%) report watching video content on these platforms on a daily basis, while over a third (35%) watch at least three hours of social video content per day. YouTube is far and away the most popular individual social media or social video service among this age group, with almost nine out of ten teenagers using it on a regular basis. More broadly speaking, video-based apps such as YouTube and TikTok, as well as social media platforms with a high volume of video content such as Facebook and Instagram, tend to be more popular among teenagers than text-oriented platforms such as Discord, Reddit, or X.

The celebrities that have emerged from these apps have proved to be some of the most powerful individual figures when it comes to shaping youth culture today. None, however, wield quite as much influence as Jimmy Donaldson, AKA MrBeast. As of 2024, Donaldson's YouTube channel has more subscribers than any other;[46] 31% of kids and teens surveyed for this research named him as their favorite content creator, making him more than six times as popular as the next best-liked creator, Kai Cenat.

In many ways, Donaldson's content epitomizes the cultural values that these platforms are instilling in today's kids and teens—blending as it does an embrace of the "grind mindset" and flashy displays of extravagant consumption with an apparently earnest commitment to making the world a better place through large-scale acts of phila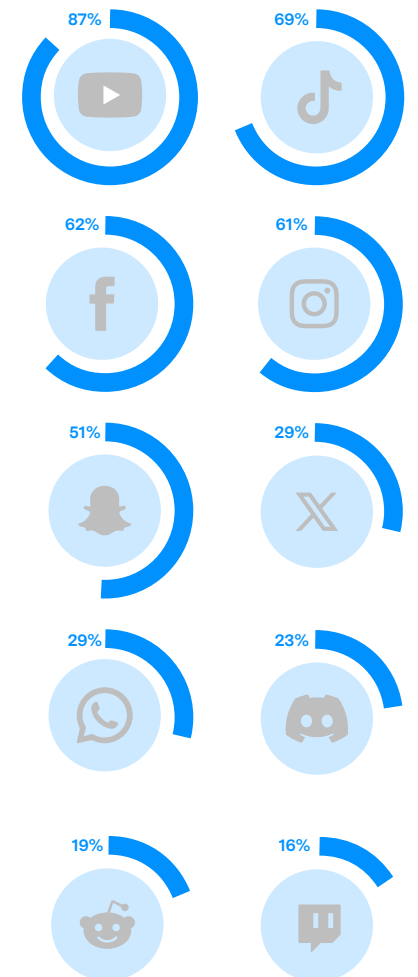nthropy.[47] Another recent NRG study found that Gen Alpha boys look up to MrBeast more than any other celebrity, and that creators such as Donaldson who make videos aimed at teen and pre-teen audiences play an outsized role in determining how this generation understands the concept of masculinity.[48]
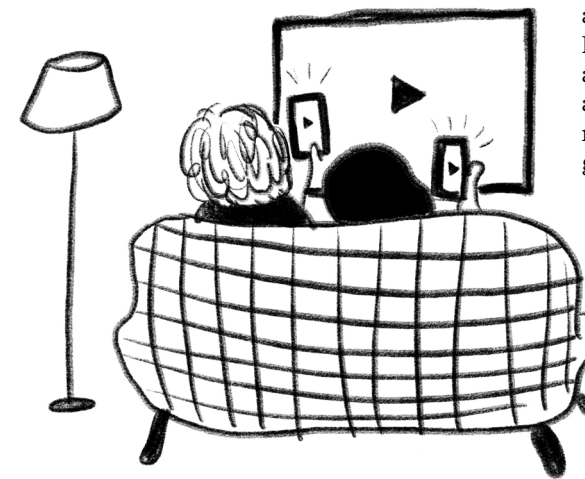
46. Liv McMahon, "MrBeast overtakes T-Series for most YouTube subscribers," BBC News, June 3rd, 2024

47. Faith Karimi, "Behind the staggering success of MrBeast," CNN, July 17th, 2023

48. "The Lost Boys: how fictional role models can help young men find their way," NRG, October 30th, 2024

Daily time spent watching social video content

	5+ Hours	3–5	1–3	0–1	Not daily
Teens 13–17	14%	21%	45%	15%	5%
Kids 6–12	11%	18%	39%	15%	17%

Social platforms used regularly by teens

Percentage of teenagers, 13-17, who report using each platform in a typical month

- YouTube 87%
- TikTok 69%
- Facebook 62%
- Instagram 61%
- Snapchat 51%
- X 29%
- WhatsApp 29%
- Discord 23%
- Reddit 19%
- Twitch 16%

Kids and teens' favorite content creators

Open-ended responses

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
MrBeast	Kai Cenat	PewDiePie	CoryxKenshin	Charli D'Amelio	FGTeeV	SSSniperWolf	A for Adley	IShowSpeed	Markiplier
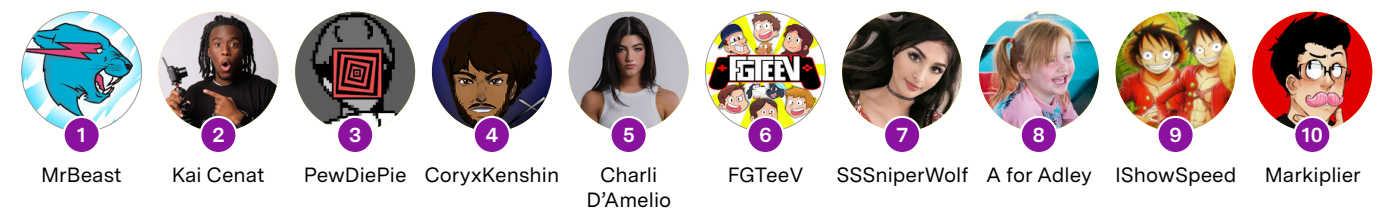
For Gen Alpha, one feed of content is rarely enough

This sense of "content overload" among Gen Alpha, however, is not just a reflection of the infinite variety of content that is constantly at their disposal; it's also a product of the way in which this generation has become accustomed to consuming media.

It's extremely rare for today's kids and teens to fully devote themselves to a single piece of media. So-called "second screening"—the act of watching content on one device while simultaneously scrolling through a social media feed, playing games, or performing other activities on a smaller screen—was already a popular way for Millennials and Gen Z to consume content.[49] Gen Alpha, it seems, are also enthusiastic adopters of this practice, perhaps to an even greater degree.

Whatever type of content Gen Alpha is consuming at any given moment, it's probably not the only thing they're paying attention to.

Over two-thirds of kids and teens say that second-screening is their default mode of engagement with TV and streaming content. For some, this behavior even extends beyond the home. Almost one in five teens now use their phones even when watching movies in theaters—a trend that's caused a certain degree of intergenerational tension.[50]

Already, we're seeing these habits have a profound effect on media targeted toward younger generations. Reportedly, many streaming services are now specifically designing their content with "second screen" viewing in mind, rewriting dialogue and adding exposition to make storylines easy to follow for viewers spending half their time looking in another direction.[51] To an extent, therefore, these behaviors are a self-fulfilling prophecy: the more that streamers and studios design their content for background watching, the less obligation kids and teens are likely to feel to pay it their undivided attention.

18%
of teens (13–17) say that they typically use their phones while watching movies in theaters

Percentage of kids and teens who use a second screen at least half the time when…

68% …watching TV shows

63% …watching movies at home

56% …playing video games
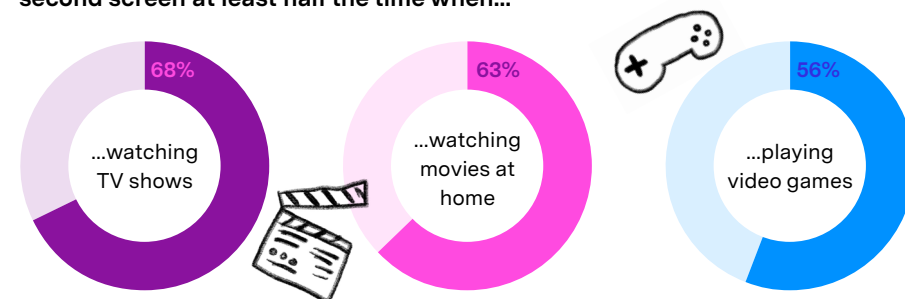
49. Jason Pollock, "Long Read - Twitter, TV and the future of social media as a 'second screen'," AdNews, September 5th, 2023
50. Belen Edwards, "Why is everyone using their phones in movie theaters?," Mashable, August 10th, 2023
51. Ralph Jones, "'Not second screen enough': is Netflix deliberately dumbing down TV so people can watch while scrolling?," The Guardian, January 17th, 2025
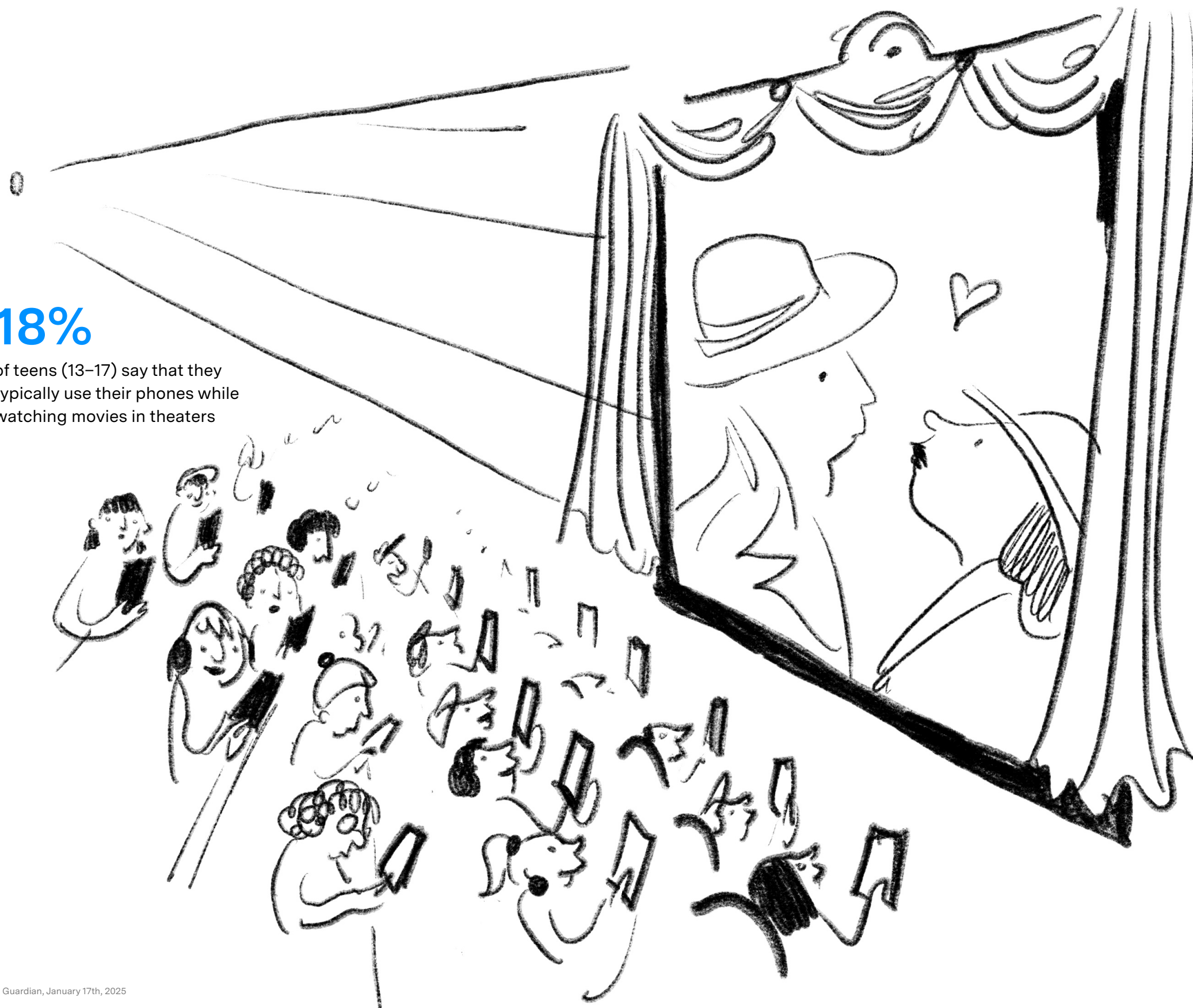
Parents are highly concerned about the impact of social video content on their children

The previous section of this report explored the challenges parents face when it comes to keeping their kids safe in digital spaces. By the same token, many of today's parents express deep concern about the media diets of their children—and, in particular, about the impact of their exposure to social video content.

There are multiple issues at play here, from the potential impact on kids' attention spans and cognitive development[52] to the challenges of ensuring they stick to age-appropriate content. Moreover, many parents may have reservations about the values instilled in their kids by popular influencers and content creators[53]—the way that many of these creators implicitly encourage their audience to blur the lines between fiction and reality,[54] and the degree to which they promote unrealistic expectations and body image standards.

Thanks to this confluence of concerns, **four out of ten parents believe that video content on platforms like YouTube and TikTok have a negative impact on children**—more than twice the number who see this type of content as a positive influence.

And many have taken steps to restrict the total volume of video content their kids are able to consume; 83% of parents have at least attempted to set screentime limits, although only around half say that these limits are strictly enforced within their households. The net effect of these screentime limits, however, is a subject

of much debate among researchers and child development specialists,[55] with some now pushing back against the popular conception that there's a measurable and statistically meaningful link between screen exposure and children's cognitive development.[56]

Of course, there's a long and storied history of parents fretting about their kids' media diets. In the sixties, parents worried about the deleterious effects of popular music; by the nineties, many felt that kids were spending too much time watching TV and reading comic books. Interestingly, very few parents now view TV as a negative influence on their children—which speaks to the way in which these concerns tend to morph over time. Inevitably, by the time Gen Alpha are themselves having kids, there will be some new content format for them to worry about.

Q: Have you tried to set a screentime limit for your kids?
Parents of kids under 12

Median screentime limits set by parents	
Weekdays	3 hrs.
Weekends	5 hrs.

17%
Yes, and I **strictly** enforce it — 49%
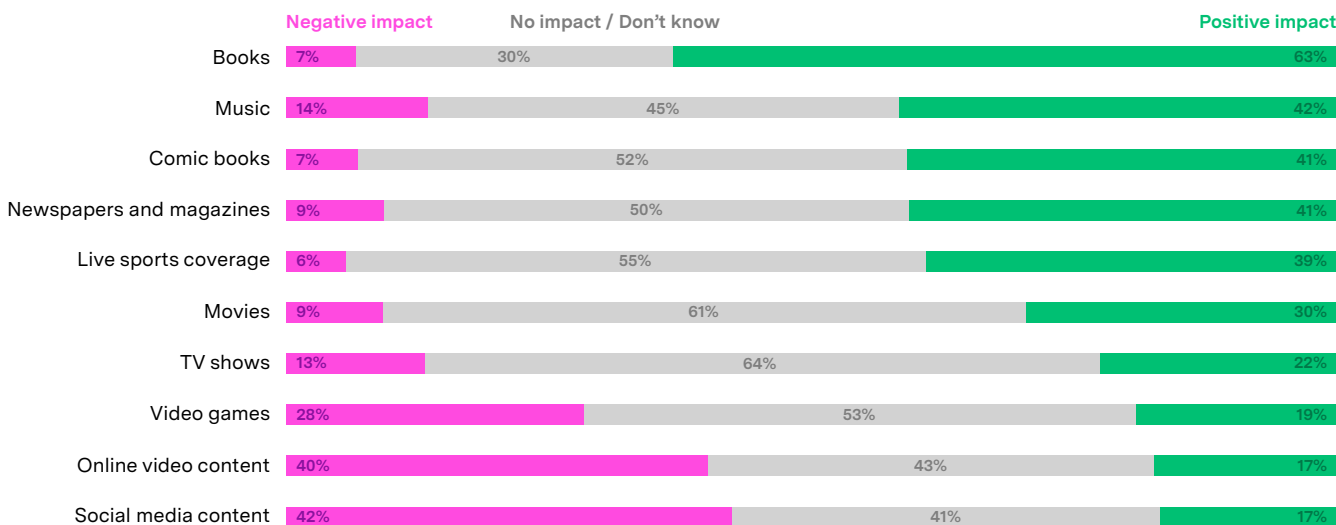Yes, but I **don't strictly** enforce it — 34%
No
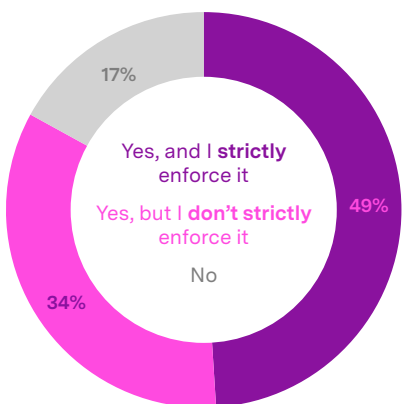
58%

of parents say they spend "a lot" of time thinking about how to ensure their kids are watching age-appropriate content on social video platforms

Q: What impact do you think different types of media have on kids?
Parents of kids under 12

	Negative impact	No impact / Don't know	Positive impact
Books	7%	30%	63%
Music	14%	45%	42%
Comic books	7%	52%	41%
Newspapers and magazines	9%	50%	41%
Live sports coverage	6%	55%	39%
Movies	9%	61%	30%
TV shows	13%	64%	22%
Video games	28%	53%	19%
Online video content	40%	43%	17%
Social media content	42%	41%	17%

52. Nadia Tamez-Robledo, "Why 'Brain Rot' Can Hurt Learning—and How One District Is Kicking It Out of School," EdSurge, January 16th, 2025
53. Meg St-Esprit, "So, Your Kid Wants to Be a YouTuber. Should You Let Them?," PC Mag, March 3rd, 2023
54. Casey Kleczek, "Kids may consider their favorite YouTube stars to be friends. Here's why—and what parents should watch out for," Yahoo!Life, December 28th, 2023
55. "Children's screen-time guidelines too restrictive, according to new research," University of Oxford, December 14th, 2017
56. Amy Fleming, "All in the mind? The surprising truth about brain rot," The Guardian, January 29th, 2025
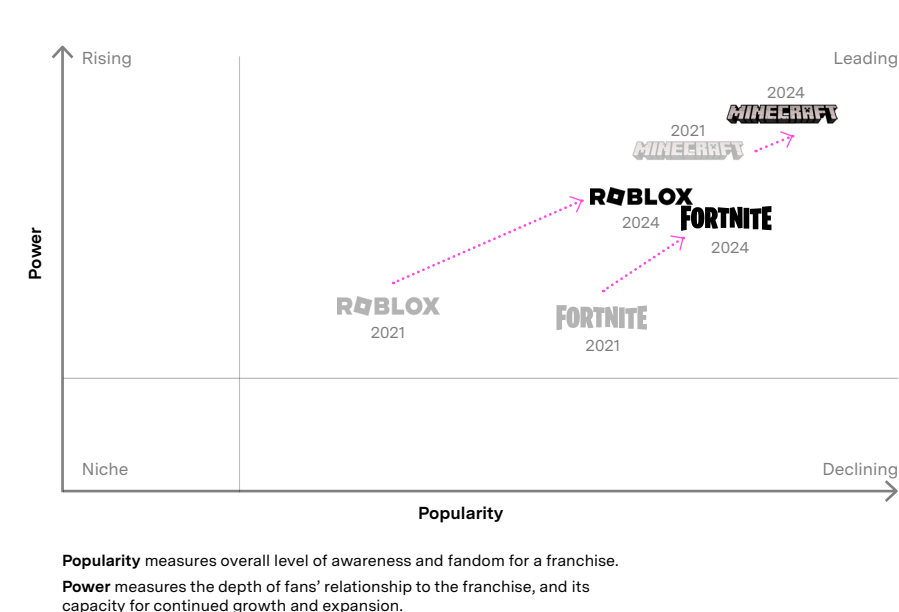
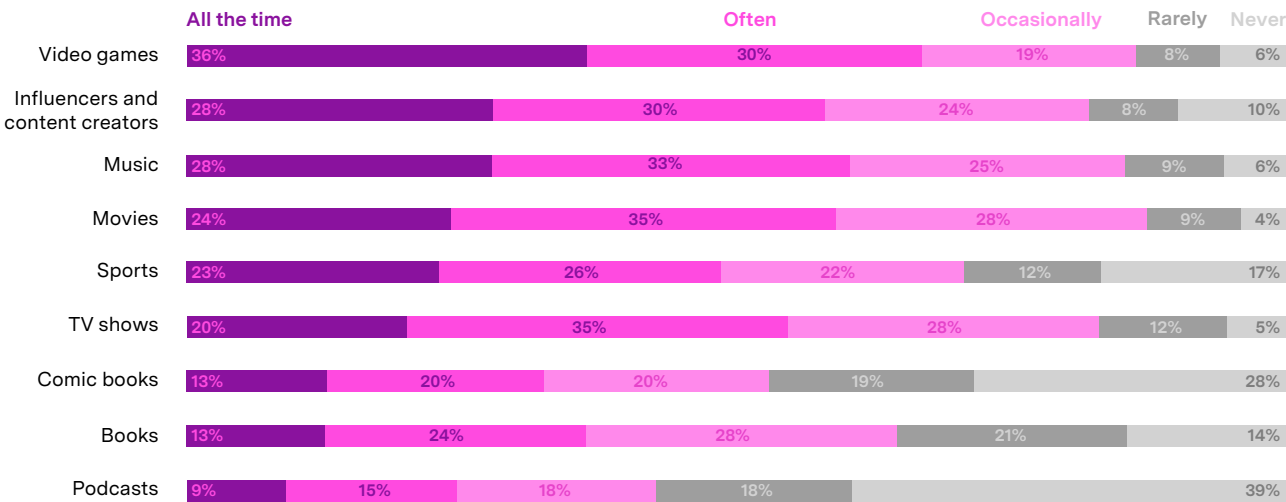# It's gaming, however, that's the biggest driver of youth culture

If there's one type of media that does more than any other to shape and define culture for today's kids and teens, it's video games. Despite the amount of time that young people spend scrolling through content on social video apps, gaming is the topic they're most likely to discuss when hanging out with their friends. Indeed, even the language and the vocabulary of Gen Alpha reflects a generation for whom video games are the primary driver of culture.

From describing people as NPCs to asking rhetorical questions to an imagined audience of chatroom participants—as seen in common expressions such as "Chat, this real?," or "Chat, am I cooked?"—many of Gen Alpha's most popular pieces of slang have their origins in livestreaming platforms and gaming-centric apps

Franchise progression among under-18s[57]
Top social gaming franchises

Popularity measures overall level of awareness and fandom for a franchise.
Power measures the depth of fans' relationship to the franchise, and its capacity for continued growth and expansion.

How often kids and teens talk about different types of media with their friends

	All the time	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Video games	36%	30%	19%	8%	6%
Influencers and content creators	28%	30%	24%	8%	10%
Music	28%	33%	25%	9%	6%
Movies	24%	35%	28%	9%	4%
Sports	23%	26%	22%	12%	17%
TV shows	20%	35%	28%	12%	5%
Comic books	13%	20%	20%	19%	28%
Books	13%	24%	28%	21%	14%
Podcasts	9%	15%	18%	18%	39%

Driving conversation: the franchises kids say their friends talk about the most[58]
Q3 2024

Pink highlight indicates gaming-driven franchises

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Boys 2–12	ROBLOX	FORTNITE	MINECRAFT	Pokémon	Grand Theft Auto	Spider-Man	LEGO	One Piece	Among Us	SpongeBob
Girls 2–12	ROBLOX	Barbie	Disney Frozen	Inside Out	Minecraft	Fortnite	Disney Princesses	L.O.L. Surprise!	Minions	Pokémon

like Discord.[59] Expressions such as "looksmaxxing"[60] or "goblin mode," meanwhile, are suggestive of a generation that sees their own lives as a type of video game, casting themselves as RPG characters with stats that can be toggled on or off or adjusted on the fly.

Data from NRG's Franchise IQ program—a weekly tracker that measures franchise health across a wide variety of media formats—reinforces the idea that video games have played an outsized role in helping create a shared cultural identity for Gen Alpha. For kids under 12—and especially for young boys—video game properties dominate the list of franchises they talk about day-to-day with their friends.

More specifically, it's social gaming franchises like *Roblox, Minecraft,* and *Fortnite*—titles that put the emphasis on creative self-expression and collaboration with other players—that truly stand out as the defining cultural touchstones for Gen Alpha.

While it was Gen Z that first started embracing these types of games en masse, Gen Alpha are proving to be even more enthusiastic fans of the genre. **Over the past three**

years, interest in the "big three" social gaming platforms among kids and teenagers has risen sharply—despite the fact that all three of these franchises were already wildly popular to begin with.

In many ways, the popularity of these platforms is yet another expression of Gen Alpha's tendency to use technology as a tool for building communities and fostering meaningful human connections. These games act as a sort of digital playground: social hubs where kids and teens can come together to interact with their existing friends and

make new ones within a relatively safe environment. For today's young people, gaming is far from a solitary activity; instead, it's a deeply embedded part of their social rituals.
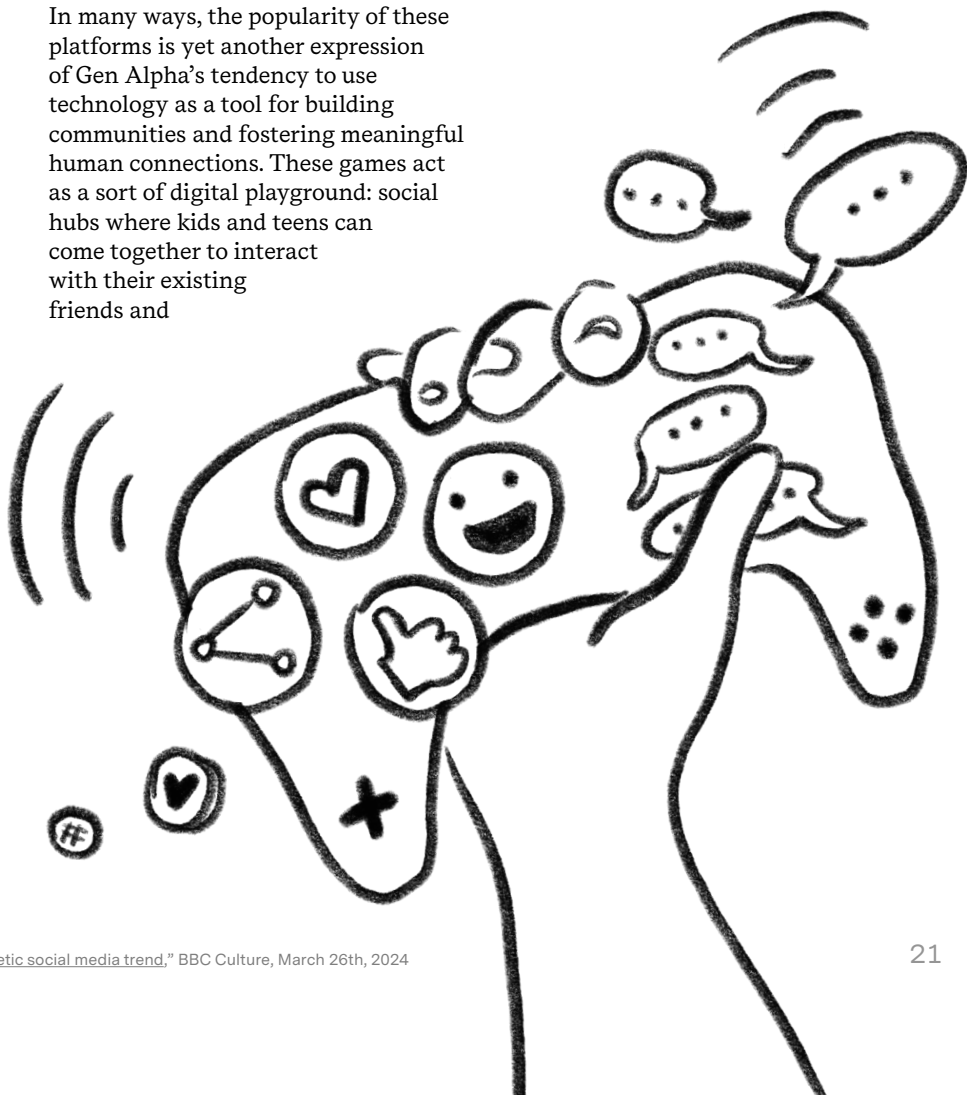
58. Data from NRG's Franchise IQ program
59. Steffi Cao, "Hey, Chat," Slate, November 3rd, 2024
60. Riley Farrell, "Inside looksmaxxing, the extreme cosmetic social media trend," BBC Culture, March 26th, 2024
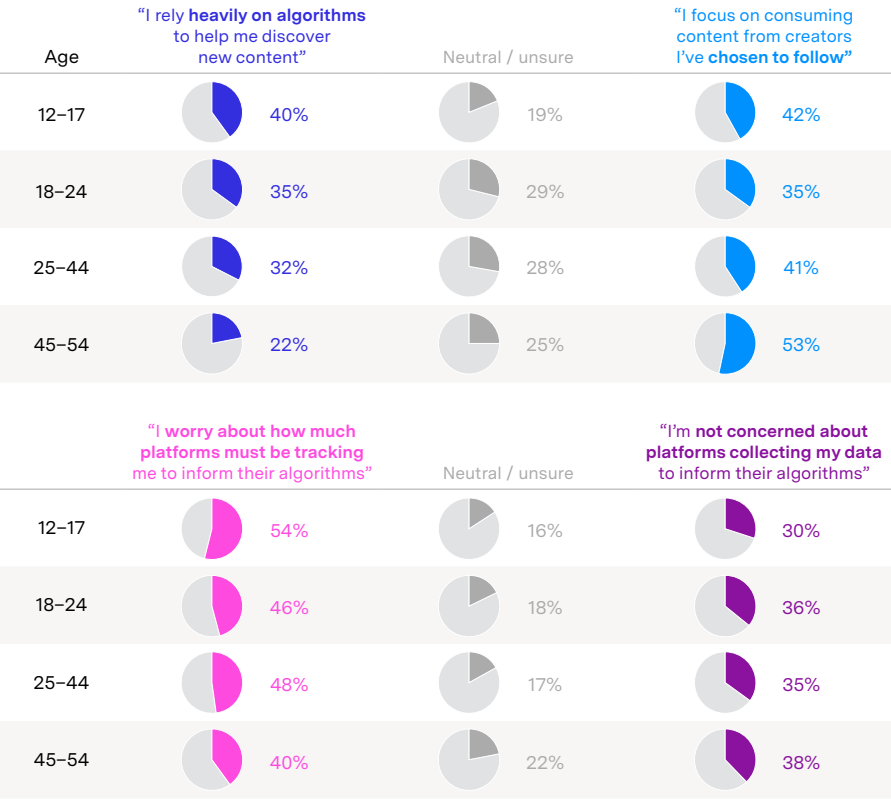
Kids and teens want to become empowered fans, expressing themselves through their media consumption and curation

The popularity of social gaming titles among Gen Alpha, however, is more than just a reflection of their desire to build community in online spaces. A central part of the appeal of these platforms is the opportunity they provide for creative self-expression: within these digital sandboxes, players are able to build their own universes, create their own gaming experiences, and mix and match characters from their favorite movie and TV franchises.

In this respect, the growing popularity of social gaming platforms among kids and teens is part of a broader cultural shift—and demonstrates the way in which Gen Alpha is rethinking the entire concept of fandom. Kids and teens aren't interested in passively consuming content and allowing it to wash over them; increasingly, they want to become active and empowered fans. They're seeking out experiences that blur the lines between consumption and creation—with the goal of feeling a sense of personal investment in and ownership over the media franchises they engage with.

This drive for agency can be interpreted as an emerging backlash against the "contentification" of culture,[62] and the sense that many

Attitudes toward algorithms on social media platforms[61]

Age	"I rely **heavily on algorithms** to help me discover new content"	Neutral / unsure	"I focus on consuming content from creators I've **chosen to follow**"
12–17	40%	19%	42%
18–24	35%	29%	35%
25–44	32%	28%	41%
45–54	22%	25%	53%

Age	"I worry about how much **platforms must be tracking** me to inform their algorithms"	Neutral / unsure	"I'm **not concerned about platforms collecting my data** to inform their algorithms"
12–17	54%	16%	30%
18–24	46%	18%	36%
25–44	48%	17%	35%
45–54	40%	22%	38%

61. Data from NRG's Future of Social Video syndicated research product
62. Sarah Manavis, "In a world where everything is "content", nothing is "art"," The New Statesman, June 6th, 2023
63. Data from NRG's Franchise IQ program

Favorite anime franchises among 13 to 17 year-olds[63]
Q1 to Q3, 2023

1. Dragon Ball Z
2. Naruto
3. Demon Slayer
4. Jujutsu Kaisen
5. My Hero Academia
6. Sailor Moon
7. One Piece
8. Death Note
9. Yu-Gi-Oh
10. Fullmetal Alchemist

young people have that their media diets are increasingly spoonfed to them by large corporations and their black box algorithms.[64] **Compared to older consumers, Gen Alpha is more likely to feel that algorithms play a major role in how they discover content online**—and they're more likely to worry about the implications of a world in which social media services and streaming platforms are constantly tracking their every digital move.

In the face of a content landscape governed by faceless algorithms, Gen Alpha are starting to push back and assert their individuality and unpredictability. Increasingly, they're looking for opportunities to show the entertainment industry that they can't be pinned down into neat little boxes; they're creating their own cultural moments, not just consuming the content that's actively marketed toward their generation.

We see this manifest, for example, in the popularity of library content among younger audiences—with shows like *Suits* and *Grey's Anatomy* periodically spiking in popularity as these consumers discover them for themselves in the back catalogues of streaming platforms.[65] By discovering and watching these shows—and participating in their memeification online—younger audiences are able to create a shared identity that feels uniquely theirs, rather than one that's been foisted on them by cultural gatekeepers.

This passion for active discovery is also a big part of the reason that international and foreign-language content has become so popular among younger audiences[66]—and why anime, in particular, is now an essential cultural touchstone for America's teens and tweens.[67] In many ways, anime culture is the perfect example of the empowered
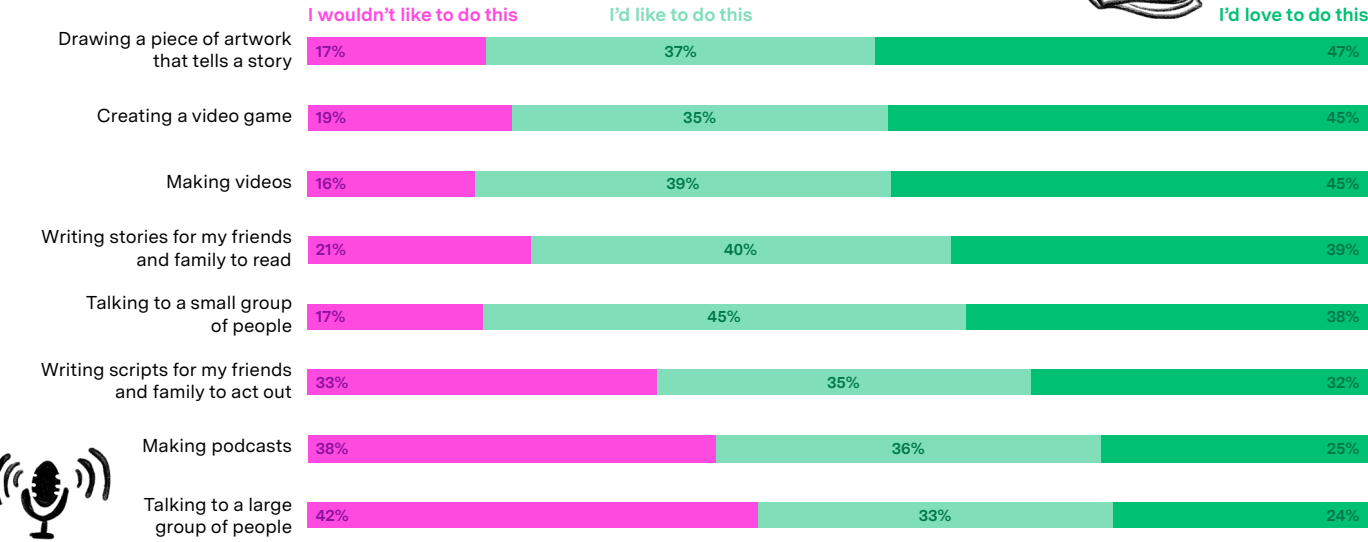
fandom model that Gen Alpha are seeking out for themselves. Much of the genre's appeal is rooted in the community that exists beyond the screen, and the opportunities that community provides for self-expression and creative remixing within and across franchises.

As Gen Alpha grows up and their access to content expands, we should expect to see them look for more opportunities to develop their identities as empowered fans, and assert a sense of ownership over the stories and the franchises that truly matter to them. Fundamentally, this is a generation that doesn't want to have its cultural identity dictated to it by others. Today's kids and teens want to tell their own stories in their own voices—treating every new technology and new content medium as a vehicle for exciting new forms of personal expression.

64. Nigel R. Bairstow, "Social Media's Transformation: User Freedom to Algorithm Power," Psychology Today, November 28th, 2024
65. Sam Adams, "Why Suits Was the Most Streamed Show of 2023," Slate, January 30th, 2024
66. Dan Meier, "More Than Half of Viewers in English-Speaking Markets Are Watching Non-English Content," Videoweek, July 30th, 2024
67. "Why the world is falling in love with anime," NRG, September 6th, 2024

Q: How interested would you be in telling stories in these different formats?
Kids and teens, 6 to 17

	I wouldn't like to do this	I'd like to do this	I'd love to do this
Drawing a piece of artwork that tells a story	17%	37%	47%
Creating a video game	19%	35%	45%
Making videos	16%	39%	45%
Writing stories for my friends and family to read	21%	40%	39%
Talking to a small group of people	17%	45%	38%
Writing scripts for my friends and family to act out	33%	35%	32%
Making podcasts	38%	36%	25%
Talking to a large group of people	42%	33%	24%

Understanding the pressures of Gen Alpha today can help to inform the way we support them tomorrow

Today's young people are coming of age in an environment shaped by unprecedented technological connectivity, growing anxieties about global crises, and a near-endless abundance of content choices. Through it all, however, Gen Alpha is forging its own narrative of childhood, one defined by both the pressures and possibilities of a fast-changing world.

Whether they're harnessing digital tools to stay connected with friends, grappling with their fears for the future, or seeking ways to become empowered fans and creators, today's kids and teens are proactively rewriting the rules of what it means to grow up. **Importantly, they are not passive observers of cultural forces: they're creators, innovators, and changemakers in their own right, looking for authentic ways to express themselves and opportunities to influence and shape the world they will soon inherit.**

In many ways, Gen Alpha will be a generation defined by their contradictions. They lean heavily on technology for connecting with others, yet they deeply appreciate the value of time spent in-person with their communities; they have a passion for escapist storytelling even though they understand the need to think deeply about their own place in the world and their role in society; and while they're acutely aware of the profound challenges our planet is facing, they're optimistic about the potential for finding solutions in new technologies and new ways of thinking.

Understanding these shifting dynamics will be essential for anyone— entertainment and technology executives, educators, policymakers, or parents—who hope to engage or support today's kids and teens in ways that truly reflect their values and the realities of their day-to-day experiences. Young people understand the challenges that lay ahead of them as a generational cohort, and they're ready and willing to meet them head-on.

MOVING FORWARD

How we can better support kids and teens as they navigate a fast-changing world

The entertainment industry

Develop more realistic and nuanced portrayals of the way that young people interact with technology. Move beyond tropes of screen addiction and cyberbullying to more authentically capture both the challenges and the possibilities that kids associate with social media, bringing the voices of kids and teens into the creative process where possible.

Embrace empowered fandom. Offer kids and teens more opportunity to explore their own tastes and discover content on their terms—coupled with interactive experiences that allow young people to shape their own narratives and assert a sense of ownership over the franchises they care about.

Offer escapist narratives that leave room to explore real-world themes. Blending humor, hope, and heroism—and using a certain degree of metaphor and abstraction—can provide young people with healthy emotional outlets without discounting the concerns that loom large in their daily lives.

Technology companies

Provide safe digital playgrounds. Young people rely heavily on online spaces such as social media apps and social gaming platforms to make and maintain friendships, but parents struggle to know how to keep kids safe in these spaces. Incorporate robust moderation tools, parental controls, and transparent policies that reassure families while preserving kids' sense of freedom and creativity.

Build AI tools that encourage healthy childhood development. As kids lean more and more heavily on AI services to navigate the information ecosystem, we'll need to find ways of ensuring that these tools help to nurture creativity and critical thinking—rather than supplanting them.

Champion the value of real-world connections. Even though they spend most of their time online, kids are looking for more opportunities to connect with others face-to-face; they want technology to help facilitate, rather than replace, experiences in the real world.

Parents and educators

Recognize tech's social function. Kids aren't online because they love looking at screens; they're using digital platforms to form friendships and communities in a world that feels increasingly fragmented. Instead of demonizing screentime, guide children in setting healthy boundaries and using these tools safely and responsibly.

Provide channels for processing fears about the state of the world. COVID-19 and the various slow-moving crises of the twenty-first century have shaped Gen Alpha's outlook; kids need safe forums to work through their fears and figure out their role in the world.

Foster creativity in new mediums. Whether through creating video content, building their own experiences in social gaming platforms, or making AI-assisted art, kids thrive when they can blend digital exploration with hands-on creativity. Helping them find the right outlets to tell their own stories can help support their social development while easing parents' worries about screentime.

ABOUT YOUNG STORYTELLERS

Young Storytellers is an arts non-profit, raising voices one story at a time. Our programs have equipped more than 30,000 students to be the driving force in their own narratives. We empower authentic, essential new voices and change what's possible.

Young Storytellers' programs provide the guidance and support to explore, discover, and express one's own unique story, and a stage for sharing it with others. We elevate young voices to bring powerful new perspectives into our communities and society.

Learn more at www.youngstorytellers.com.

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Data & Systems Strategist

Bill Thompson
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Jaylene Benggon Chung
Managing Director

Summer Ly
Development Strategist

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Young Storytellers' partners on why their work matters

"We want to encourage all of these young children to use their voices, express themselves, and tell their stories because there are other people feeling the same exact way they are."

Max Greenfield

"When you have a job like mine, you hope you can be an inspiration by example, and Young Storytellers is a time when you can come in and actually participate."

Mindy Kaling

"To have a writing utensil, and be able to express how you feel and how you think, it's something that's pretty magical. So it's exciting for folks to be able to step into their own power."

Natasha Rothwell

"One of these ideas could turn into an actual movie or something one day... I want to be in that movie!"

Seth Rogan

This report was made possible by the thousands of children who have participated in Young Storytellers' program over the years.

We at **NRG** and **Young Storytellers** are enormously grateful to these brilliant, creative, and talented individuals, and deeply honored to be the stewards of their stories.

ABOUT NRG

National Research Group is a leading global insights and strategy firm at the intersection of content, culture, and technology. The world's most innovative brands turn to us for insights into growth and strategy for any content, anywhere, on any device.

For more on trends shaping the entertainment and technology sectors, explore our previous reports, or reach out to us directly at inquiry@nrgmr.com.
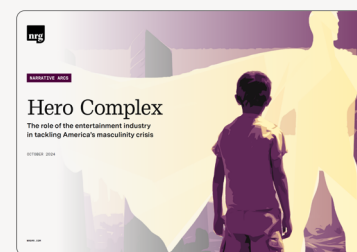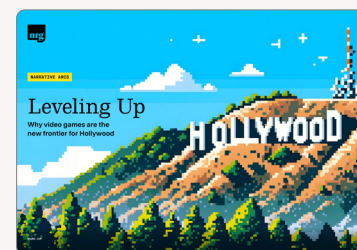
Hero Complex
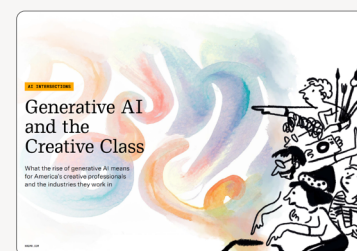The role of the entertainment industry in tackling the "crisis of masculinity" afflicting today's boys and young men
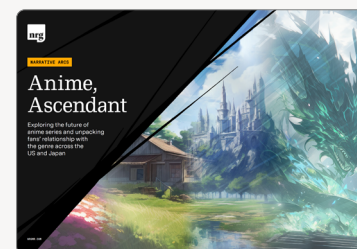
Anime, Ascendant
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Why video game adaptations could be the next frontier for Hollywood

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How AI products and services are upending the lives of America's creative professionals