

# Young People & Loneliness in the Digital Age

## Quick recap

A webinar was hosted on young people, loneliness, and the digital age, featuring presentations on loneliness statistics, online activities, and social media impacts, with particular focus on Snapchat's role in young people's social connections. The discussion concluded with research findings on digital media's effects on loneliness and social interactions, emphasizing the importance of quality relationships and the role of technology providers in supporting young users' social connections.

## Summary

### Webinar: Youth, Loneliness, and Digital Age

Harry Hobson and Alex Quattrone hosted a webinar on young people, loneliness, and the digital age, exploring how these three areas intersect. They introduced themselves and explained the webinar's focus, noting its connection to their work at Neighbourly Lab and their collaboration with various organisations. Harry mentioned that the session would include a presentation followed by a discussion, and he encouraged participants to use the chat function to introduce themselves. The webinar was recorded for those unable to attend, and participants were informed of the recording and the chance to watch it back later.

### Loneliness Among Young Londoners

Harry presented data showing that young people aged 16-29 experience significantly higher levels of loneliness (10%) compared to the general population (6%), with young Londoners being particularly affected by transitions, poverty, and lack of stable relationships. He highlighted that young people are four times more likely to experience life changes, twice as likely to be single, and more likely to face acute poverty, all of which contribute to their higher loneliness rates. Harry also mentioned recent polling showing declining trust among young people and noted that governments and VCs are increasingly focusing on addressing loneliness in this age group.

## **Online Habits of Young Adults**

Alex presented data on young people's online activities, highlighting that 18-24 year-olds spend an average of six hours online daily, with significant time spent on social media platforms like Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram. He discussed concerns about the potential negative impacts of excessive screen time and online exposure, particularly following a TV series that highlighted these issues.

The presentation also included findings from a Snapchat study showing diverse online activities among young people, ranging from socialising to learning and finding work opportunities.

## **Social Media's Role in Youth Communication**

Alex presented findings from a Snapchat-funded study on social media's impact on young people aged 13-24 in the UK. The research used ethnographic interviews and a nationwide survey to analyse how different platforms like Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp are used for communication, content sharing, and entertainment.

The study revealed a clear distinction between platforms focused on content and social media (TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram) and those primarily used for communication and social connection (WhatsApp, iMessage, with Snapchat falling between the two).

The research highlighted that while content-focused platforms serve entertainment purposes, communication platforms play a crucial role in maintaining social connections and providing emotional support.

## **Snapchat's Role in Youth Social Connections**

Alex presented research on Snapchat's role in young people's social connections, highlighting five key benefits: building friendships, maintaining relationships with wider networks, sharing with close friends and family, coordinating social lives between online and offline, and providing support during transitions. He shared a personal story about Jessica, a 14-year-old who used Snapchat to connect with someone she liked, which led to a relationship. The research was based on conversations with young people and aimed to understand how technology, specifically Snapchat, supports social connections and communication among youth aged 13 to 24.

## **Snapchat's Role in Teen Social Connection**

Alex discussed how Snapchat benefits teenagers and young adults during their transition decade, highlighting its role in building friendships and maintaining social connections.

Harry summarised seven qualities of online activity that can contribute to preventing loneliness, including promoting social connection, prioritizing real relationships, encouraging real-world activities, and offering emotional support. The discussion emphasized the importance of understanding how different apps and platforms, including Snapchat, support young people at various life stages.

## **Teen Online Sociality and Development**

Harry presented a research study combining ethnography and quantitative data, which will be released in the next week or two. He proposed a discussion on the thesis that online time is essential for teenagers' sociality and development, but its quality varies.

The group discussed how to protect the positive role of online platforms in social connection, debated whether quantity or quality of online time matters more, and considered what the tech industry could do to support young people's loneliness.

## **Online Interactions and Youth Loneliness**

The group discussed methods for evaluating the impact of online interactions on social connection and loneliness among young people. Harry explained that they have developed a theory of change model and conducted research using surveys to understand young people's perspectives on social media platforms.

Alexandra Petrache, a new member of the DCMS Social Connection, Isolation, and Loneliness group suggested stratifying data to examine how different groups of young people benefit from online interactions and raised questions about the responsibility of tech companies in supporting young users.

## **Digital Media's Impact on Youth**

The discussion focused on the impact of digital media on young people, particularly Generation Alpha.

An attendee raised concerns about developing solutions for future generations, noting that young people are becoming increasingly digital-native. Harry and Alex discussed the distinction between passive and active social media use, highlighting the potential for doomscrolling and the importance of tools like Snapchat for social connection.

Another attendee questioned the need for social media when young people are in school and suggested more research on how digital media affects real-world relationships and expectations. The group agreed on the need for further research into these areas.

## **Social Media and Youth Loneliness**

An attendee discussed the impact of social media on loneliness, emphasising that quality of relationships, not quantity, is crucial. They highlighted the responsibility of social media platforms to design applications that facilitate meaningful interactions and mitigate loneliness among young people. Harry agreed, suggesting that technology providers should act as stewards for young users, promoting high-quality interactions and taking a proactive role similar to educational institutions.

Another attendee and Harry, both questioned the binary view of digital versus in-person interactions, noting that online connections can be meaningful and should not be dismissed as inherently superficial or harmful.

## **Snapchat's Role in Teen Socialising**

The webinar discussed the role of social media platforms like Snapchat in young people's social interactions, with Alex explaining that Snapchat serves as a tool for shy teenagers to build friendships by sending images and filters.

An attendee shared a quote from Dr. Vivek Murphy about the importance of direct human contact, which Harry agreed was valuable but noted that online interactions should be optimised to support real-life connections rather than interfere with them. The discussion concluded with an invitation to join the Tackling Loneliness Hub for further debate about technology and social interactions, and participants were asked to complete a survey about the webinar afterwards.

## **Next steps**

- Alex Quattrone to share the full research report on the Tackling Loneliness Hub when it's released in the next 7-10 days.
- Harry Hobson to put a notice on the Tackling Loneliness Hub when the research report is released.

- Neighbourly Lab to publish the nationwide survey results about how young people spend their time online and the impact of social media platforms.