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# Digital Trends Snapshot

Tech Control: Digital Wellbeing Update

2022

**#TechControl**

Campaigning to promote healthy and positive use of technology

Leading  
Independent  
Schools



DIGITAL  
AWARENESS

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## Introduction & Background

HMC in partnership with Digital Awareness UK launched the first Digital Trends Report in 2019, providing analysis of key online challenges and opportunities faced by senior schools, weeks before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Since then, Digital Awareness UK has continued to work closely with schools, gaining unique insights into how young people's relationship with technology has changed during this unprecedented time. In 2022, HMC and Digital Awareness UK used this insight to develop a digital trends survey that was completed by 6,662 students aged 13 to 16 in schools across the independent and state maintained sector. The results of the survey, which are outlined in this Digital Trends Snapshot, provide a quantitative summary of young people's digital experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This Digital Trends Snapshot forms part of the Tech Control campaign, which has been developed by HMC and Digital Awareness UK to promote healthy and positive use of technology.

The five trends outlined in this document are some of the most prevalent issues uncovered through the survey analysis:

- 1. Friendships are being forged online, leaving many feeling unsafe**
- 2. Digital activism makes young people feel informed, motivated and angry**
- 3. Exposure to offensive and sexual content is on the rise**
- 4. Increased use of social media has a positive and negative impact on mental health**
- 5. Parents have relaxed rules around the use of technology**

In addition to this document, HMC and Digital Awareness UK have created the [Tech Control 3 video](#), an educational resource designed to provide schools with a platform to discuss the issues identified in this research in an informed and helpful way. [Please click here to view the video.](#)

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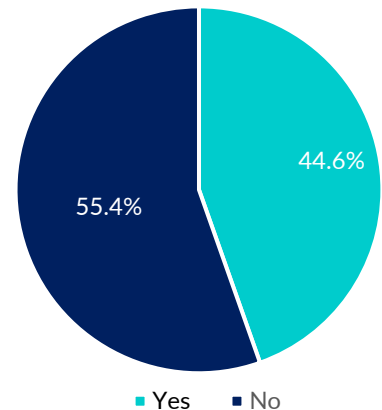


## Trend #1: Friendships are being forged online, leaving many feeling unsafe

Social media has provided a lifeline for young people who have been starved of social interaction during this pandemic. Their perception of the role technology has played in their lives during this time is mostly positive, with 46% saying they feel 'more positive about social media since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic' and 28% saying this is because it has 'helped them to make new friends'.

Whilst there are significant benefits for young people when it comes to building friendships online, concerns around the implications of them engaging with strangers (especially at a time when record high numbers of online grooming crimes have been reported by the police) are troubling schools and parents alike. Of those respondents who had formed friendships with people they didn't know on social media, 22% said they didn't feel safe doing so.

**During the pandemic, did you connect with anyone online that you didn't know in real life and form a friendship?**



**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** It's critical for schools to acknowledge that for teenagers, being part of and building online communities is an important and enjoyable part of their digital experience. Whilst it's important for young people to be aware of the dangers of engaging with people they don't know online, oversimplified narratives around "not speaking to strangers" may not feel realistic or reasonable to them. Ensuring they have the skills required to identify dangerous people and refrain from sharing personal information with them is essential.

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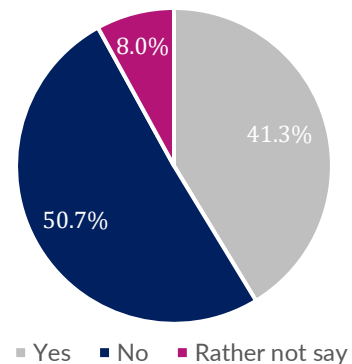


## Trend #2: Digital activism makes young people feel informed, motivated and angry

During this pandemic, content related to major social and political campaigns (from Everyone's Invited and the COP26 climate change conference to the wars in Ukraine and Afghanistan) has been shared and debated over online.

Young people are using social media as a platform to support the causes they believe in. Many feel positive about seeing content related to campaigns such as these – for example 55% felt 'informed' about racism as a result of the content they saw online about the Black Lives Matter movement and 36% felt 'motivated to speak up' about it. At the same time, 18% felt 'angry' and 'upset' and 8% felt 'pressured to speak up' and 'powerless'.

Since the pandemic began, have you shared anything on social media in support of a movement or cause you care about?



**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** It's important for young people to learn how to engage in civil discourse both on and offline. Schools are well placed to provide a platform for students to discuss and process the overwhelming amounts of distressing and empowering content they are seeing online, whilst arming them with the tools needed to manage these experiences.

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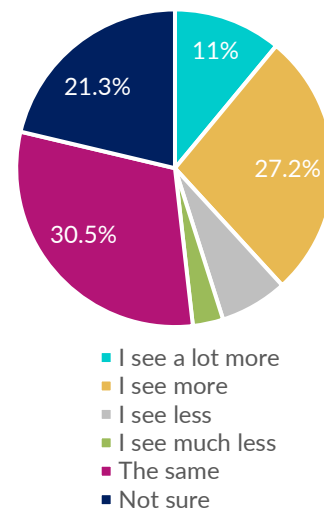


## Trend #3: Exposure to offensive and sexual content is on the rise

In 2018, a survey from HMC and Digital Awareness UK uncovered that over a third of teenage boys admitted to sending or receiving racist or homophobic content. The prevalence of exposure to offensive content continues to increase as this survey reveals that 30% of young people have seen racist or homophobic content on social media in the last 48 hours.

In addition, 16% have seen a nude or sexually explicit image or video of someone on their mobile device in the last week, highlighting the alarming rates at which young people are seeing and processing inappropriate content.

**Have you seen more or less offensive content on social media since the Covid-19 pandemic began?**



**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** Schools aren't always informed of behaviours such as the sharing of nudes amongst students, often due to fear of sanctions. The act of sharing or receiving sexual content can be consensual, but young people are also coerced or blackmailed into sending it, or receive it without permission (which is why the government's recent announcement that cyberflashing will become a criminal offence will be a welcome addition for many). Equally, students may not be forthcoming when discussing sensitive topics such as racism or sexism. So it's critical that schools create opportunities for them to talk openly and honestly about the types of content they are exposed to (both good and bad), whilst weaving in messaging around respect, consent and the law.

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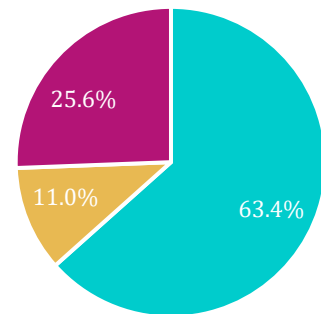


## Trend #4: Increased use of social media has a positive and negative impact on mental health

Young people have understandably spent unprecedented amounts of time on social media during this pandemic. 56% said they sleep with a mobile device in reaching distance, demonstrating how important it is for them to be in close proximity to their devices, even at night time.

They reported clear mental health benefits following the use of social media in this survey with 45% saying social media leaves them feeling 'calm', 54% feeling 'happy' and 26% feeling 'good about themselves'. However, they did reveal some negative side effects, with 13% reporting that it leaves them feeling 'anxious' and 13% feeling 'lonely'. 22% also said they usually feel worse about the way they look after going on social media.

Have you used social media more or less since the Covid-19 pandemic began?



■ More ■ Less ■ The same

**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** The digital landscape shifted in 2021 to focus on the possibilities of metaverse – a digital space where real and virtual worlds collide. As our virtual and physical lives become increasingly intertwined and we spend greater amounts of time online, it's more pressing now than it ever has been to ensure young people have the skills required to navigate digital spaces safely and safeguard their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. This can be achieved through cross-curricular education that focuses on developing healthy digital habits; covering topics such as posture wellness, stretching and digital eye strain as well as providing structures that offer mental and emotional support.

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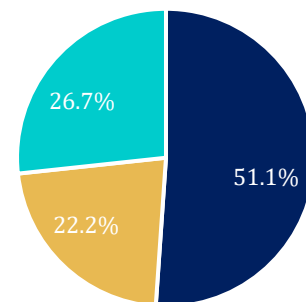
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## Trend #5: Parents have relaxed rules around the use of technology

Parents and carers have been juggling the challenges of remote working, home learning and the pressures of the pandemic, all whilst caring for their families. Understandably this has presented challenges when it comes to enforcing rules and boundaries. This survey found that of the 63% of young people who said they used social media more since the COVID-19 pandemic began, 25% said it was because their parents/carers have let them use social media more.

**Have your parents or carers been more relaxed about how you use personal devices since the pandemic began?**



■ Yes ■ No ■ Not sure

**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** Setting boundaries when it comes to the use of technology is invaluable to promote the healthy and positive use of technology and reducing exposure to risks and harms. As children become young adults it's equally as important to teach them how to self-regulate. It's critical that parents feel informed around how to set helpful and realistic boundaries for their children and the school can support them with this process by sharing helpful resources, encouraging them to discuss issues related to digital parenting with the school and inviting them to relevant events such as online safety talks. The first [Tech Control video](#) developed by HMC and Digital Awareness UK can provide parents with inspiration around how to set boundaries for their families.

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## Other research findings

- 51% agree with the statement “I can’t imagine life without social media”
- 48% agree with the statement “I wouldn’t mind if social media had never been invented”
- 41% check their mobile device after going to bed
  - Of these, 17% said this makes them feel more tired at school
- 30% think that young people who post about Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ rights or climate change are *not* more likely to take positive action to help the causes in real life
- 15% would tell an adult they trust if they saw content online that made them feel uncomfortable, 4% would tell a teacher and 11% would tell a parent or carer. 69% would ignore it or try to manage it independently
- 28% think there should be a daily limit to the amount of leisure screen time they have
  - Of these, 42% said it should be 2 – 4 hours per day, 26% said 4 – 6 hours per day

[Click here](#) to access the latest Tech Control resources.

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