# Digital Trends Snapshot

**Tech Control: Digital Wellbeing Update**

2023

# Introduction & Background

Since 2015, The Head's Conference (HMC) in partnership with Digital Awareness UK has been conducting research to uncover unique insights into how young people are using technology and using those insights to build innovative resources and solutions for schools.

This year, 8,839 students aged 13 to 17 completed a Digital Trends Survey in schools across the independent and state-maintained sectors. The results of the survey provide a quantitative summary of young people's digital experiences and highlight the extent to which young people's opinions, behaviours, even the essays they produce, are influenced by people (such as influencers) and technology (such as AI-powered chatbots).

Young people are attempting to navigate the challenges and opportunities presented to them by this ever-changing digital landscape at a time when educational institutions, policy makers, technology companies, families and beyond are faced with unprecedented challenges around how they can be navigated safely and responsibly. The five trends outlined in this document are some of the most prevalent issues uncovered through the survey analysis:

1. **Unsafe products being purchased following recommendations from social media influencers**
2. **Support for social media influencers having the ability to share harmful or hateful content**
3. **Poor sleep hygiene on the rise**
4. **AI is redefining the teaching and learning experience**
5 **The majority of young people believe AI will not replace teachers in the future**

The Online Safety Bill, which will be passed this autumn, seeks to keep people safe online. Should this come into effect as planned, the next Digital Trends Snapshot will indicate how impactful it has been in safeguarding young people from trends such as those highlighted above.

This Digital Trends Snapshot forms part of the Tech Control campaign, which has been developed by HMC and Digital Awareness UK to promote the healthy and positive use of technology. Click here to access the Tech Control resources designed to support schools and families.

# Trend #1: Unsafe products being purchased following recommendations from social media influencers

Influencer marketing is a multi-billion-pound industry and young people are making purchasing decisions based on recommendations from influencers at record levels. Whilst the majority of these purchases are not harmful, young people are increasingly buying dangerous products online.

The survey reveals that 24% of respondents had either purchased or maybe purchased products recommended by social media influencers (such as muscle-building supplements, beauty products and diet pills), that they *knew* could be unsafe.

**Have you ever purchased a product that was recommended by a social media influencer that you knew could be unsafe?**



- 11%
- 13%
- 76%
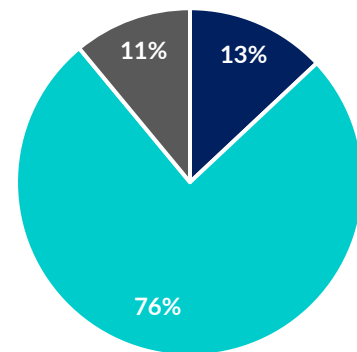
■ Yes  ■ No  ■ Maybe

**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** If a quarter of young people are potentially buying products that they know could be unsafe, it's highly likely that even more will be purchasing unsafe products without realising they are doing so.

Encouraging students to think critically about how unsafe products (which may not meet the requirements set by relevant regulatory bodies) could impact their health is of course critical. However, it is also important that they recognise that influencers could be encouraging them to purchase products and services because they are financially incentivised to do so, and that influencers may not have tried and tested the products themselves before making recommendations.

# Trend #2: Support for social media influencers having the ability to share harmful or hateful content

Whilst the vast majority of social media influencers are not spreading harmful views online, some (many of whom have been spotlighted in the media of late) are sharing homophobic, transphobic, racist, sexist and misogynistic views freely online.

As a result, 56% of respondents had seen social media influencers share misogynistic views, 52% had seen them share racist views and 54% had seen them share homophobic views online.

When questioned about whether social media influencers should be able to share their views, *even* if they could be harmful or encourage people to be hateful towards a person or group of people, 42% said they should. The main reasons for this included "freedom of speech" and "human rights".

**Do you think social media influencers should be allowed to share their views, even if they could be harmful or encourage people to be hateful towards a person or group of people?**



42%

58%
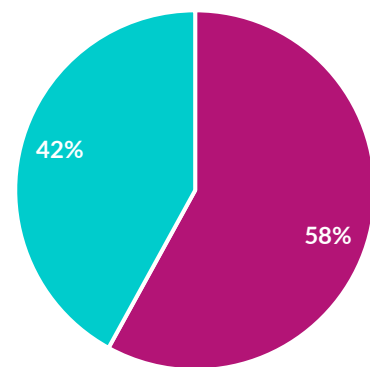
■ Yes ■ No

**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** Whilst sadly it's not surprising to learn that so many young people are exposed to content that could be harmful or encourage people to be hateful towards a person or group of people online, it *is* surprising to see that so many are in support of social media influencers being able to share it.

It is imperative that young people understand the consequences that harmful views can have on society at large – even if they believe people have the right to express those views. It's also critical they recognise that because of the way social media algorithms work, influencers are more likely to engage and attract audiences if they share opinions that evoke a strong emotional reaction, such as shock, horror, or surprise. Therefore, not all social media influencers necessarily believe in the extreme views they share themselves. These algorithms also mean that just because young people are regularly being exposed to these types of content and can see that lots of people are engaging with it on social media, that doesn't necessarily mean most people agree with these views.

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# Trend #3: Poor sleep hygiene is on the rise

In 2016, the Digital Trends Survey revealed that 42% of young people slept with their phones within reaching distance at night. It also found that 45% of them were checking their phones after going to bed and just 32% of their parents were unaware that this was happening.

This year, 55% said they slept with their phones within reaching distance, demonstrating that this trend is increasing in spite of increased awareness around the negative impact screens can have on sleep.

**Do you sleep with your phone within reaching distance?**



45%

55%

■ Yes  ■ No
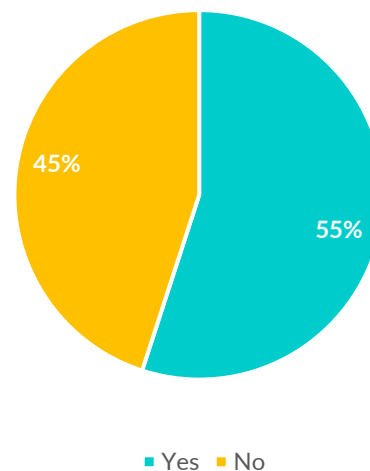
**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** Helping young people to develop healthy digital habits so that they can eat, sleep, study, be active etc. effectively is central to their wellbeing. It is therefore important that they reflect on the impact technology is having on factors such as quality sleep to see how it can be improved. Students repeatedly tell us that the quality of their sleep is greatly impacted when they have a device pinging, flashing and buzzing next to them at night. Where possible, their guardians should be made aware of this.

Organisations such as the Sleep Foundation advise that young people should sleep with devices out of reach at bedtime, ideally outside of the bedroom. It's also helpful for them to understand how to make use of wellbeing settings on their devices such as 'Do Not Disturb' or 'Night Shift Mode' to help them manage distractions.

# Trend #4: AI is redefining the teaching and learning experience

Increased use of AI-powered chatbots such as ChatGPT has had a profound impact on both teaching and learning. While some educators believe AI tools are putting academic integrity into question, others are utilizing the technology for lesson planning, resource creation, report writing and much more. In fact, in September 2023 Teacher Tapp reported that 34% of teachers and leaders were using AI tools to "help with school work".

AI tools present endless opportunities for young people to enhance their learning along with additional challenges to navigate.

This survey has found that of those who are using AI-powered chatbots to help them with school work, 22% are doing so to write essays, 56% to learn about topics, 45% to find resources related to their studies, 33% to learn new words and to expand their vocabulary and 33% to explain things that they don't understand.

**Do you use AI-powered chatbots to help you with schoolwork?**



26%

74%
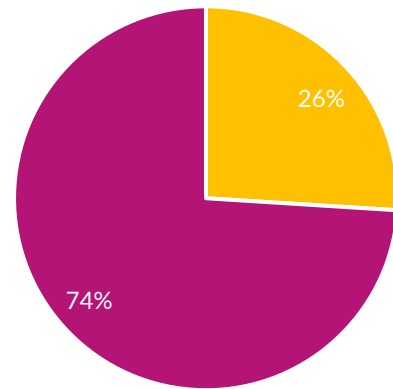
■ Yes  ■ No

**Digital Awareness UK recommends:** We have reached another pivotal moment in the education technology space where we are grappling with how educators can move at the speed of technology to leverage the opportunities presented by AI.

The numbers of young people using AI-powered chatbots is growing exponentially and even since this research was conducted, the amount using these types of technologies will have grown further still.

As both teachers and students alike learn how to enhance and streamline teaching and learning processes through the use of tools such as ChatGPT, the focus will turn towards how digital literacy skills can be improved to help them manage the risks these tools present (particularly around the management of misinformation, scams and inappropriate content).

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# Trend #5: The majority believe AI will not replace teachers in the future

Whilst there are concerns in the education sector and beyond about whether AI will replace teachers in the future, many believe that human interaction will always be necessary to effectively instruct, inspire and motivate students.

This survey revealed that three quarters (74%) of young people believe AI will not replace teachers in the future.

**Do you think that AI could replace teachers in the future?**



26%

74%
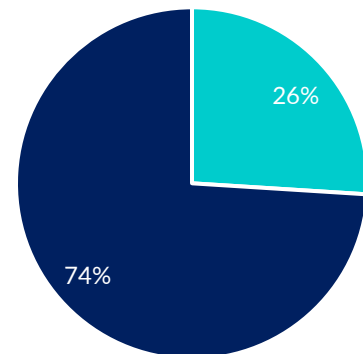
■ Yes  ■ No

# Other research findings

- 46% said if they saw an influencer share harmful or hateful content online they would do nothing
- 12% made money by following advice that was given to them by a social media influencer
    - Ways money was made included: Drop shipping, affiliate marketing, stocks, Bitcoin, Crytpto, YouTube, Steam Market, Forex Trading
- 54% agreed with the statement "I wouldn't mind if social media had never been invented" (compared to 48% in 2022 and 63% in 2017)
- 71% claim social media inspired them to get fit and be healthy
- 49% turn to social media to learn about important causes e.g. climate change
- 62% are learning new skills and instruments through social media use
- 37% want to pursue a career in technology as a result of social media

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