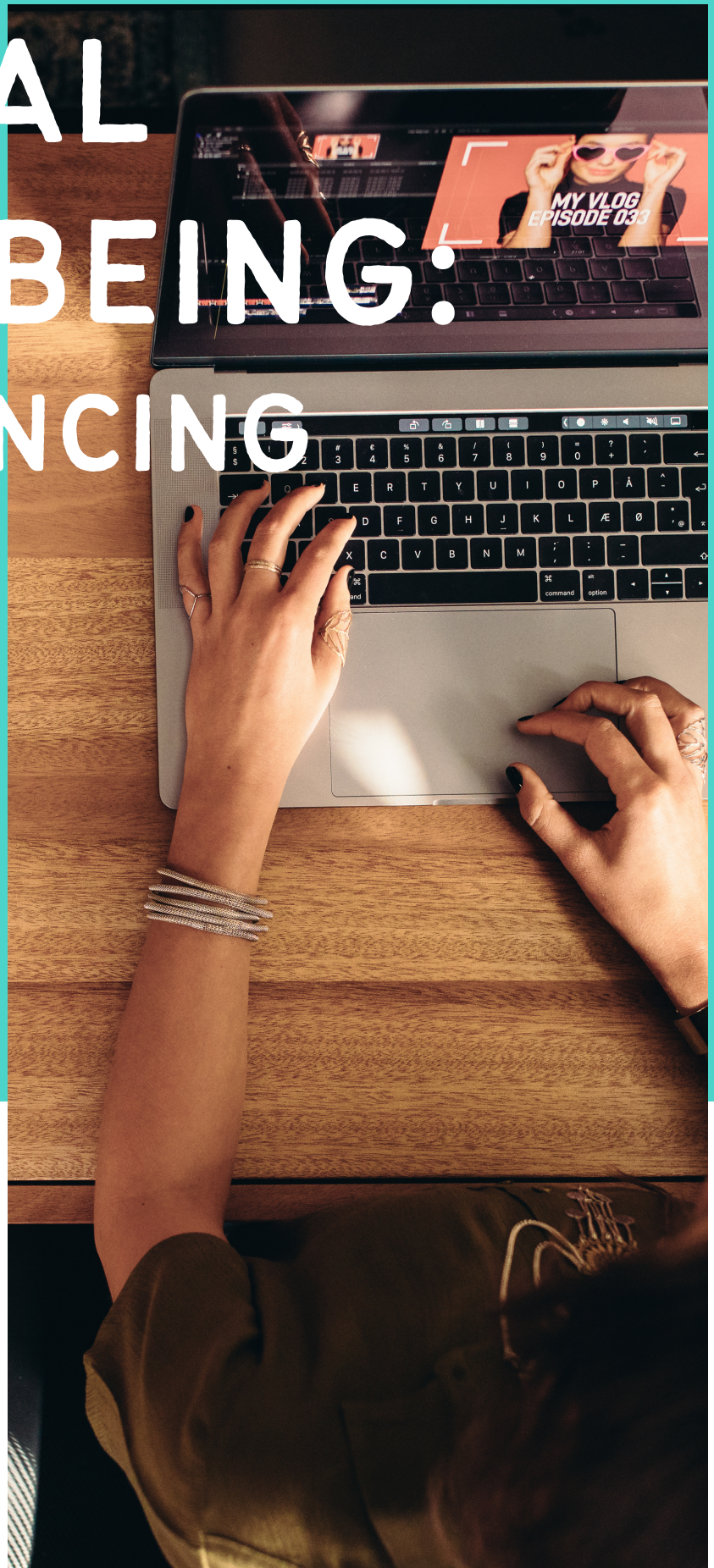


DIGITAL WELLBEING: A BALANCING ACT



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A Report by VoiceBox

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ABOUT US

VoiceBox was created to give young people's voices a boost. We are a social enterprise made up entirely of young people with the goal of injecting a youth perspective into decision making, wherever it takes place.

More often than not, young people are left out of important conversations. At best, we are 'consulted' in some fashion, but it's rare to find our voices included in the decision-making process in any meaningful way.

Products and policies are routinely informed by best guesses about what young people want and need - with no young person sitting at the table at all.

Meanwhile, young people are having conversations of their own about the exact topics organisations and legislators want to understand. These conversations happen in unique ways, in various digital spaces - but they often aren't seen, or taken seriously. That creates a gap - between the lived experiences of young people and the policies, products and services that we consume. It also creates an opportunity cost. By failing to listen to the discussions young people are starting and conducting themselves, adults miss the opportunity to make decisions that will land well and meet young people's needs.

Celebrating the fact that our team at VoiceBox consists of members on both sides of the Atlantic, we cover global topics by listening to young people's voices around the world.

We introduce organisations to the young people whose voices they need - and help them make better policies, products and services together. Everything we do is *led* by young people, *for* young people.

Through our content platform, our Ambassadors and our research, we are creating spaces where young people can genuinely express themselves - without getting lost in the noise.

Find out more: voicebox.site

INTRODUCTION TO THE REPORT

Introduction to the report

This report was commissioned by Parent Zone – the experts in digital family life. As part of Parent Zone’s 2021 Digital Parenting Week, we were asked about young people’s views on digital wellbeing and more specifically how our generation plans to tackle the issue with their children – when the time comes.

Methodology

The insights gathered for this report are reflective of VoiceBox as an international organisation. Opinions and thoughts were gathered from young people in the UK, America, Colombia, India, Australia and Singapore.

We used a mixed methodology of both surveys and informal interviews with young people between the ages of 16 to 23.

As the majority of Digital Parenting Week’s audience is UK based, we placed particular attention on gathering insights from young people in the UK.

We asked young people to put themselves in the shoes of parents and think about how they might encourage their children to engage with technology in a healthy way.

We hoped to find some useful insights into what young people believed were appropriate rules for an online existence but also just how much those rules differed from the ones we see from parents, schools and other organisations.

Our report explores themes around screen time; digital access; the positive and negative impacts tech has on wellbeing; concerns and advice for other young people; and finally the impact of Covid on digital wellbeing.

We acknowledge that it can only offer a snapshot of young people’s views and that inevitably some perspectives will be missing. But we can provide an authentic insight into the views young people express when they are free to say whatever they think without judgement, consequences or adult mediation.

WHAT IS DIGITAL WELLBEING?

The first step in our research was to understand what 'Digital Wellbeing' meant to young people. It quickly became clear that the idea of 'Digital Wellbeing' was extremely broad with respondents mentioning physical and mental health, online relationships, addiction, education and much more. One clear and consistent message did emerge: Young people are wary of the impacts technology is having on their lives. We are not naive to the risks, nor the rewards, that exposure to the online world can pose. As technology continues to play a greater and greater role in our lives, young people are becoming increasingly aware that steps need to be taken to create a healthy and productive relationship with the online world.

Although responses were many and varied, we were able to crystallize what young people understood by digital wellbeing:

According to young people, Digital Wellbeing is a tightrope we all walk in the online domain. It isn't the total avoidance of risk and harm through a removal of access to any technology. Nor is it the unmediated welcoming of technology into every aspect of our lives. You cannot claim to have achieved Digital Wellbeing without first utilizing the technology to aid your education, relationships, and hobbies. Conversely, Digital Wellbeing cannot be measured in likes, followers or videogame achievements.

Digital Wellbeing comes from extracting the most value you can from the online world while avoiding and discarding the aspects of technology that put your mental and physical health at risk.

DIGITAL WELLBEING: AVOIDING HARM

For the young people involved in our research, the source of Digital Wellbeing was the balance between gaining value from the online world and avoiding its potential harms. The people we spoke to came up with a variety of concerns that worried them. Though these concerns were broad, the most commonly mentioned 'harm' was to a user's mental and physical health.

Despite embracing social media, it is clear that young people are increasingly wary of the impact it can have on their mental health, both on an individual and a systemic level. Many people mentioned the direct harm that can be caused by online bullying and harassment:

"The internet has now been used to bully and be mean, as people can hide behind a screen. Digital wellbeing is the opposite of that"

Others saw greater risks from overexposure to the social media platform itself, and the stresses that can place on their health:

"I'm careful about the relationship I have with my phone and social media and how toxic it can be for my mental health"

"You can get stressed because tech takes over sometimes"

"Give yourself a break from screens so that you have fresh air and it's good for your eyes"

A common response to these issues was to 'self manage' online behaviour, and to know when to take a step back from the online world:

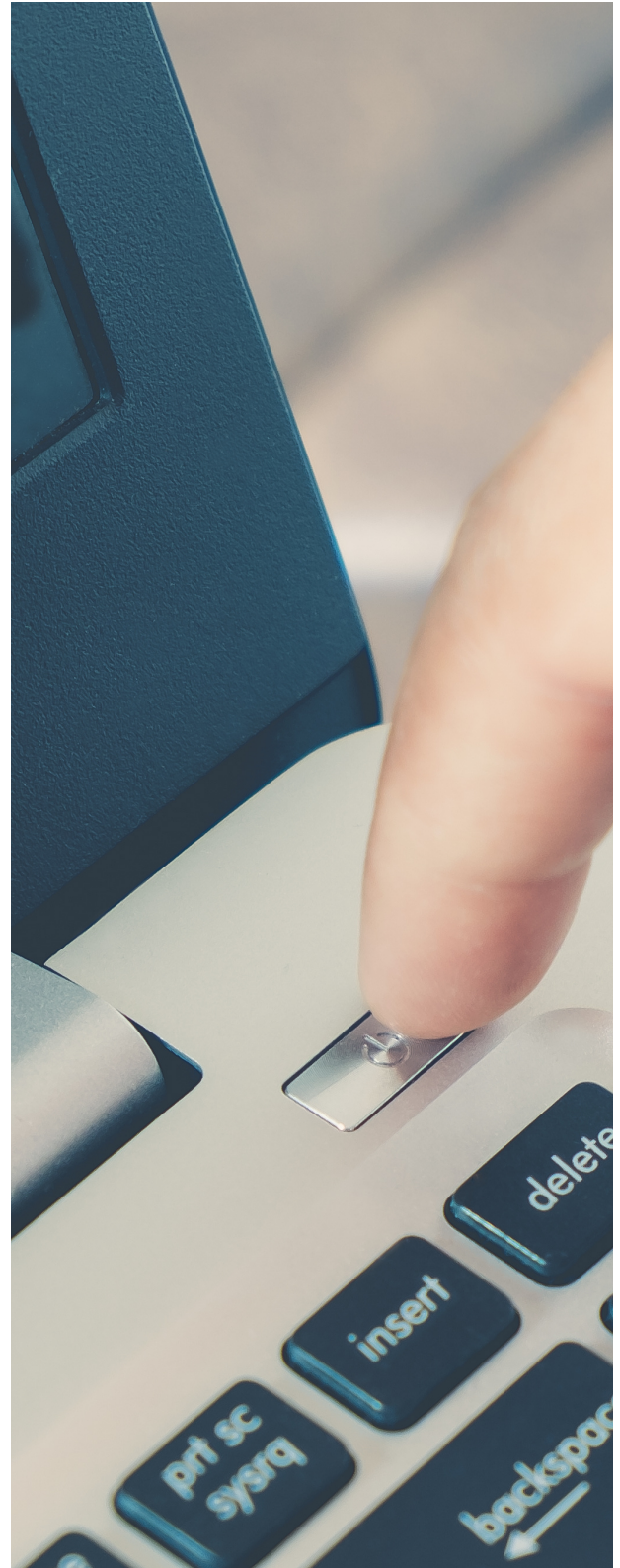
"I have a setting where I can set a time limit for how long I'm on the app, and it really helps with not procrastinating as much"

"I try to be conscious of being a better person online"

"I make sure I'm taking a break from social media especially when I am feeling stressed or drained."

"Using the internet how it was meant to be used; as a source to connect people and acquire knowledge. Using it in favour of your interests and for something good"

Contrary to popular belief, young people are aware of risks and they do take steps to mitigate them.



DIGITAL WELLBEING: MAXIMISING BENEFIT

While parents might interpret young people's desire to restrict excess time on social media as a need to protect them entirely, this could not be further from the truth. Young people strongly believe that you cannot achieve Digital Wellbeing simply through the avoidance of all risks and harms; you also have to engage in the online world in a beneficial and healthy way.

All of the young people we spoke to had mobile phones and nearly all of them had their own laptop, or at least access to one, and all of them stressed the value of this access, particularly as it pertains to education. The COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the education landscape, and it would have been almost impossible to engage with education without sufficient access to technology. The effects of the pandemic may be waning in the UK but it seems unlikely that the heavy reliance on technology in schools and universities is something that will disappear. As such, for young people, the importance of access to technology cannot be stressed enough when it comes to education.

“You’re much better off with a laptop so that you can type your notes and write papers a lot easier”

“Thank God I have access to technology and it makes me feel better since I have access to a lot of information and training programmes”

No one seems to argue that the educational opportunities that technology makes available isn't a significant benefit to young people - particularly when we have been kept away from schools and universities. It perhaps goes without saying that access to online education and learning tools is crucial to maximising the benefit of technology, and therefore to maximising Digital Wellbeing.

“You need technology in your life to keep up”

While, given the recent circumstances, online education was at the forefront of young people's minds, it was only the tip of the iceberg of value that technology can provide to a young person's life. Many spoke about using the internet to explore interests and hobbies, whether this was learning new skills or educating themselves on certain topics. Lots of young people had learnt new things through YouTube, for example, and found the internet a great resource to explore their interests.

"You can watch art videos to improve your skills"

"You can watch history videos and political videos"

"You can follow accounts on social media as a way of learning about different cultures"

It is clear that, for young people, the online world is an outlet to engage with culture, politics, media and many other things. While parents might find it tempting to disregard watching YouTube videos as a waste of time, young people point to many benefits, whether it's simply a way to relax from a long day, or a tool for learning, fostering interests and personal growth. Whilst the safety debate about the platform often focuses on the problematic content – and parents on its 'time thievery', young people point to examples like 3Blue1Brown, a YouTube channel dedicated to explaining complex mathematical concepts, with nearly 4 million subscribers and a video with over 10 million views about the Fourier Series. Similarly, they highlight things like SortedFood, a YouTube channel dedicated to sharing recipes and cooking tips with 2.5 million subscribers and a video about cooking ramen with over 2 million views.

The message from young people is that the days when watching YouTube was simply a way to pass a few minutes watching cats do something cute are gone. It is now a tool to learn and explore in one of the largest libraries on the internet.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PARENTS?

When parents look for parenting information, it feels as though there is no opinion valued less than that of the young person. Parents happily consult organisations, magazines, and forums, but when it comes to asking young people, it seems to be viewed as a fool's errand (Perhaps people are anticipating the response of "Chocolate for breakfast. No bedtimes. No school, only videogames.").

To go some way to remedy this, we asked young people helping us with this report to step into the shoes of a parent, and think about how they would aid their children in achieving a high degree of digital wellbeing.

Young people were certainly not naive to the potential risks that come with tech access, and see it as a crucial responsibility of parents to moderate and intervene in the online access of their children. When we asked them to think ahead to the things they would be most concerned about, many young people were alarmed about the idea of their future child engaging with harmful content online, whether stumbling across certain websites or interactions with both strangers and their peers.

"Going on websites that are adult, explicit, extremist, graphic etc"

"Coming across inappropriate content"

"Cyberbullying"

"Interactions that you might have with strangers"

"To find out your child is depressed and they've used the internet to find more sad content that promotes that condition."

Some mentioned being worried about scams and people stealing their information. In particular, the term 'catfishing' was frequently used to describe a person who uses a false identity on the internet to deceive or manipulate someone else. Others were also worried about their future child getting viruses from certain sites.

Others were concerned about addiction and spending too much time on certain websites and apps.

One significant concern raised by many young people was manipulation and child exploitation. While there were concerns expressed about "traditional" exploitation (i.e an older person grooming a child into explicit acts) there was also significant concern over more common, "everyday" exploitation. Many people were concerned about harmful relationships in which one person may pressure the other to share explicit photos of themselves. Similarly, many young people were concerned about the perhaps more subtle allure of likes, fame and influence and the potential manipulation of their future child into harmful acts which they may not be comfortable with, and that may cause them harm for years to come.

"People stealing your information and using it"

"If I was a parent, my biggest concern is that my child would get scammed online especially when they are younger"

"Someone catfishing you - not knowing who's out there"

"Getting addicted and dependent"

"How much time you spend on certain materials"

"Being manipulated about sending sexual content, pressured to do so"

"To be manipulated by someone or guided to do something bad for likes or fame"

BOUNDARIES AND PRIVACY

Firstly we wanted to ask about appropriate boundaries between parents and young people. Many young people explained that they are already very open with their parents about their online use, and would hope for the same with their children:

“We actually watch a lot of similar things on YouTube as we both love dance videos”

However, there was a clear consensus that young people needed to have some privacy, and thus the freedom, to explore the online world:

“I wouldn't mind if she looked at my social media, I don't post a lot on it anyway. But I would rather if she didn't follow me on social media just so that I had the freedom of it”

“I don't do anything that would make them upset - but it would be weird to show them because my online world is my own business and I like having some privacy”

“It's like having your own room - even if you're not doing anything bad in your room it is still important to have that privacy”

These attitudes were reflected in how young people said they would parent, with the consensus being that it is important to have two-way communication between parents and children about their tech use, whether it's watching videos together or just talking about what sites they like to use. That said, the next generation of parents plans to give their children some breathing space to explore their identity, perhaps by allowing them to keep their social media private, or not sharing the password to their devices.

RESTRICTIONS AND SCREEN TIME

We also wanted to explore young people's attitudes towards curbing total screen time and online access. Many young people had expressed self-imposed restrictions on their online behaviour, but some also discussed restrictions put in place by their parents:

"Before I started high school I wasn't allowed to be on social media, or have a phone or a laptop. I got my first phone when I started high school (11 years-old) with the purpose being to text my parents."

"I didn't have anything but youtube until I was 13 - the younger me stuck to the rules and was ok with not having social media because I didn't feel I needed it in my life. But as soon as I turned 13 I jumped on the bandwagon."

While some of these external restrictions were resisted at the time, when asked whether they would impose any restrictions on their own child's online access, the consensus was overwhelmingly in favour:

"I would definitely set age restrictions - probably similar to what I had because I think I joined at a good age and any younger is too young because it's not very safe. You wouldn't be able to recognize dangers as easily and bullying is harder to handle the younger you are"

"Restrict screen time as it can consume your life and be something you get obsessed over and not invest in your actual interests"

"I won't let them use certain apps"

"I would encourage them to avoid using screens in bed/ late at night"

"I would ask them to avoid being on their phone during meals and activities"

ADVICE AND ENCOURAGEMENT

There is a clear desire for intervention from parents in the online behaviour of their children. While many young people were in favour of various restrictions on digital access, the most common intervention suggested was in the form of advice and guidance. Young people we spoke to saw the need for children to have privacy online in order to push themselves and be creative, and where that privacy begins, the usefulness of restrictions ends, and as such, it was deemed crucial that parents offer useful guidance to help their children navigate the online environment on their own.

Many spoke about being aware of your behaviour and being respectful to both yourself and others. They suggested that it was important for young people to behave as you would face-to-face and not hide behind a screen and do or say things that you would not normally do in person.

Others spoke about making the most of all that tech has to offer and using tech in a productive way, whether that's learning new skills or exploring your interests.

Some people spoke about creating boundaries and learning when to step away from technology.

“Be respectful”

“Try not to be too involved in what everyone else is doing and focus on yourself instead”

“Follow pages/people who will feed your knowledge and passions in a healthy way”

“Use the internet in a smart way, using it to learn and connect with genuine people, not just for fun but make it a useful tool”

“Know your limits, if you need to focus on schoolwork make sure you put your phone out of sight”

“Do not let social media control your life - it is not worth scrolling on it constantly”

IMPACTS OF COVID

As mentioned earlier in the report, the importance of tech for young people has been heightened during the pandemic. More than ever we have had to rely on technology for key aspects of our lives; whether online learning or keeping in touch with friends and family. Access to technology has been a widely debated topic during this time; from discussing concerns for those with limited access to those who feel overwhelmed by the constant access.

Unsurprisingly, the young people we spoke to had conflicting views on if and how Covid has impacted their digital wellbeing.

Many discussed how during the pandemic, tech had a positive impact on their digital wellbeing as they learnt to use the internet in a way that they had never done before. By working virtually, they developed valuable skills and explored new and exciting interests. This will no doubt help them in the future and likely open up many opportunities.

“I can find sources of information way more easily now and also the right information as well”

“I feel more confident and I’m better at using search engines and email”

“I am on TikTok more because of Covid - it is more of a source for ideas for artsy projects I can work on”

Some felt that using technology so much during the pandemic has meant that they have become more aware of their screen time and are better at monitoring their own tech use in a way that works best for them.

“I know when to step away now for my physical well being, such as my eyes and posture”

However, others said that Covid had a number of negative effects on their digital wellbeing. Many felt that they spent too much time online yet although they weren't happy about that, they didn't know what else to do. The majority felt bored and drained and spoke about poor concentration levels.

“I wanted to be more present with the real world vs the online world. I knew I was on tech too much but I felt like there was nothing else to do”

“I was online a lot more than I had hoped to be but there wasn't much else to do”

“I feel like my attention span has gone down now because I'm used to the TikTok being so short - when they introduced 3 minute videos instead of the 1 minute limit it feels like the 3 minute videos go on forever”

Some said that social media use over lockdown had a negative impact on their mental health as they felt anxious or bad about themselves. As it was a difficult time where many people naturally felt more vulnerable, some discussed feeling worried about the type of content they came across online and not being in a strong place mentally to challenge what they saw or read.

“You would see all the models on instagram and you would want to look like them but you couldn't go to the gym or do anything to try and look more like them”

“Covid made me very anxious about what content I would consume on the internet”

“We found ourselves a little bit more vulnerable and sensitive and we could easily believe any information we search online. That's dangerous because sometimes people can take advantage of this and share many articles related about Covid which may not be true”

CONCLUSIONS

Unfortunately (though unsurprisingly), our investigation into Digital Wellbeing and what that means to young people produced complex results. It is easy to consider Digital Wellbeing as the absolute reduction of potential harms you can face online, but this is only one side of the story for our generation. *Digital Wellbeing is truly about balance.* Though it may be tempting, eliminating risk is as ineffective in the online world as it is in the offline world as there will come a time when young people become independent and will need to be able to navigate the world themselves. The message for parents is that while it may be daunting to expose your child to some level of risk online, it is crucial to balance that with the risk of being insulated from the social, educational, and personal benefits of the online world. Just as we have to learn to balance the risk of falling over or being called names in the playground with the benefit of socialising with other children and learning self expression, parents have to figure out the right balance between the risks of technology and its rewards. It would be unlikely for anyone to suggest a child who has never been to a playground and thus never grazed their knee had optimal wellbeing, and we need to use a similar standard in addressing Digital Wellbeing.

While this is a complex task, we suggest it could be achieved with more respectful conversations between parents and young people. It is neither the case that young people believe unfiltered access to the online world is ideal, nor that parents want their children as far from technology as possible, yet these caricatures are seen as the standard dichotomy of the Digital Wellbeing debate. Young people are open to and understanding of certain restrictions on their online behaviour, but think this is best achieved with a combination of flexibility, open discussion, and respect for the value the internet can provide a young person, whether that's educational, social, or personal.