FOREWORD

Prior research has examined relationships between digital media use and wellness among children. Much of it has studied screentime, social media use, gaming, and outcomes like depression and anxiety in children.

This study, a survey of 1,510 11- to 13-year-olds in Florida, significantly extends previous research by also measuring binge-watching, news consumption, music listening, cyberbullying, engagement with social media influencers, sharing false information online, and numerous aspects of well-being. As such, this survey may be the most comprehensive study of digital media use and wellness among young adolescents ever conducted.

This study is a pilot, and tests variables that will be asked in a future longitudinal panel study that will survey 11- to 13-year-olds nationwide, tracking the same respondents for decades, hence the name *Life in Media Survey*. We preview that study later in this foreword. We'll start with what we learned in the current study.

The Latest Story

One would struggle to find a kind of media use that we didn't measure. However, despite this scope, the data in our study tell a broad story that is generally straightforward and clear. It is important to keep in mind that our data come from Florida and may not perfectly reflect nationwide trends. That said, with approximately 23 million residents, Florida is the third-largest U.S. state by population, after California and Texas, so the study examines a large portion of the U.S. This is what the data tell us.

Kids with their own smartphones tend to report greater well-being than kids without them.

On nearly all measures of health and wellness, kids who have their own smartphones fared better, or at least no worse, than kids who don't have their own smartphones. Kids with smartphones, for example, reported convening in-person more frequently with friends each week than kids who have no phone or share a phone with someone else. Kids with their own smartphone were less likely than kids without them to agree that "life often feels meaningless," to be cyberbullied, and to say they felt depressed most days in the prior year. Kids with a smartphone or tablet were more likely to say they feel good about themselves than kids who don't own these devices. Income does not explain these differences; kids in wealthier homes are actually less likely to own a smartphone than those from low-income homes.

Specific digital behaviors, not smartphone ownership alone, are associated with ill-being.

Smartphones alone don't appear to be the culprit in the adolescent mental health crisis, at least not among the adolescents we sampled. More than any other single measure, the act of publicly posting or sharing things online was associated with adverse outcomes.

Kids who post publicly online—especially those who post often—were more likely to report moderate or severe symptoms of depression, and to report severe symptoms of anxiety, compared to kids who don't post publicly. Kids who don't publicly post or share online get the minimum doctor-recommended amount of sleep, more than nine hours on school nights, while those who post publicly don't.

Heavy social media use, with or without posting, however, appears to be associated with some harms. Kids who use social media daily or multiple times per day were more likely to report that technology impairs their daily lives compared to lighter users of social media. Heavy social media users were more likely than light users to say they don't get enough sleep because they're on their phone late at night, that they feel restless or irritated when they can't check their phone, and that they'd rather spend more time online than hang out with people in-person.

Efforts to limit digital media use among kids don't appear to be working.

Children in our sample may be the most digitally connected group of young adolescents in the U.S. ever surveyed, particularly our youngest participants. Whereas prior studies placed the share of 11-year-olds who have their own smartphone at around 55%, 72% of 11-year-olds in our sample reported having their own smartphone. Overall, 78% of respondents said they have their own smartphone (another 9% share a smartphone with someone else or frequently use a smartphone belonging to someone else), and more than 99% of participants use at least one kind of electronic device, whether it's theirs or someone else's. A solid majority of our respondents also said they have their own tablet (56%).

Our respondents are also getting their devices at younger ages. One in nine children who have their own phone reported getting the device at age 7 or younger. On average, the 11-year-olds we surveyed said they've had a smartphone since they were just over eight and a half years old, while the 12- and 13-year-olds in the study said they got a smartphone when they were nine and a half and ten and a half, respectively. Kids who have tablets get them at even younger ages, on average.

Fifty-two percent of children we surveyed have a phone with a data plan, connecting them to the internet 24/7. Kids reported spending an average of 4.4 hours on their smartphone and/or tablet on schooldays, 6.3 hours on non-school days. One's screentime isn't easy to estimate, so we broke the day into four, six-hour segments and asked kids to estimate their screentime for each.

Even the smallest amount of cyberbullying is associated with numerous adverse outcomes.

We asked kids if they'd experienced any of five forms of cyberbullying in the previous three months, such as having hurtful photos or videos posted about them; being called mean or hurtful names; had rumors or lies about them spread, and others. We categorized kids as cyberbullied if they listed just one (or more) of these things happening to them in the prior three months, which a striking 57% of kids did. (One in five kids said they endure one or more of these harms once or more times each week). Using this categorization, cyberbullied children were much more likely than un-bullied kids to say they've felt depressed most days in the prior year, to say they often get angry and lose their temper, to say they find it hard to stop using technology once they've started, and to say that social media causes more harm than good.

We know from prior research how harmful cyberbullying is, but our data show that even minimal amounts of cyberbullying may be associated with harm to children. Delaying smartphone ownership is unlikely to fix the problem; kids without smartphones were *more* likely to be cyberbullied.

The broad story, then, is: more kids are getting smartphones, including younger kids. That's not necessarily harmful, and may be beneficial, though certain digital behaviors and the most modest amounts of cyberbullying are harmful.

This report is highly comprehensive and captures the full digital lives of fifteen hundred kids. We encourage you to read the Executive Summary and full report, including recommendations we offer in the Conclusion to mitigate the harm associated with specific digital activities.

As this survey is the pilot study for the longer *Life in Media Survey*, we now describe that project.

The Life in Media Survey

The *Life in Media Survey* (LIMS) will be a study of digital media use and well-being across the lifespan, tracking current 11- to 13-year-olds across the U.S. for at least the next 25 years, into early and middle adulthood. While the pilot survey included participants from Florida, the inaugural LIMS will include insights from a nationwide sample of N=8,000 11- to 13-year-olds, a large enough initial sample to overcome attrition common in longitudinal surveys.

This age group was chosen for several reasons. First, large enough minorities of kids in this age group don't yet have their own smartphones or tablets (22% and 44% in our current sample, respectively) to make important comparisons between kids who own these devices and those who don't.

Second, at the current time, ages 11 through 13 are at the dawn of a new generational classification in the United States; persons born between 1995-2012 are referred to as Gen Z'ers, while those born later are often referred to by marketing researchers as "Alphas." Other researchers call them "Polars," because of two leading challenges inherited by kids born in 2012 or later: political polarization and climate change (Twenge, 2023).

Additionally, 11- to 13-year-olds are in or are entering puberty, a formative and impressionable time. Lastly, 11 to 13 is the age of middle school enrollment in the U.S., so respondents have not yet started high school—a time of greater independence, access to older friends who drive, greater exposure to drugs and alcohol, and not yet belonging to an educational group in which nearly all other children, some 95% of high school kids (Anderson et al., 2023), have their own smartphones.

Thank you for your interest in the work. Please contact us at any time for information.

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Life in MEDIA Survey