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Not All Screen Time Is Equal: How Young People Connect Online Matters for Wellbeing, Gallup and Boston Children's Find

WASHINGTON, D.C., November 18, 2026 — A new report from Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab and Gallup, with support from the Pinterest Impact Fund, finds that friendship quality is closely associated with wellbeing, with in-person friendships showing the clearest link among the three friendship modes examined, even as technology offers new ways to form and maintain connections. The study, based on a survey of young people aged 15 to 22 in 16 countries, explores young people's friendships, online habits, loneliness and wellbeing and finds that digital and in-person friendships generally coexist, while young people's online experiences vary considerably. The study also finds that frequent short-form scrolling, the most commonly reported online activity, is linked to lower life evaluation.

Offline Connections Matter Most

A median of 93% of young people report having an in-person friend, compared with 74% who have a friendship that began in person but is now maintained primarily online and 37% who have a close online-only friend. In-person friendships receive the highest ratings for strength and support.

Positive emotions are experienced across all three friendship modes, but in-person friendships stand out. Most young people often or always feel happy with their closest in-person friend (85%), and large shares also feel safe (81%) and connected (69%). Experiencing anxiety with these friends is far less common, at 13%.

Findings for online-only friendships are more complex. Compared with having no online-only friend, having a high-quality online-only friendship is not significantly associated with higher levels of wellbeing. However, young people with high-quality online-only friendships have higher odds of thriving than those with low-quality online-only friendships.

"These findings offer an important addition to our understanding of offline support's centrality to young people's lives," said David Bickham, Ph.D., research director of the Digital Wellness Lab. "As the field continues to explore how online spaces contribute to and challenge youth connection, knowing that strong in-person friendships may play a role in how they navigate these environments can help researchers and policymakers alike focus on how to emphasize protective factors for their wellbeing."

How Young People Spend Time Online

Young people's online lives are varied, but scrolling dominates. Among 15- to 22-year-olds with regular access to an internet-enabled device, 72% say they scroll through short-form content often or very often, making it the most common online activity measured. The negative effects of online engagement are concentrated in this activity, with short-form video consumption showing an association with lower life evaluation. None of the six other online activities measured show a comparable link, and several are associated with slightly higher wellbeing.

Loneliness and Online Communication

The report finds that young people's online communication patterns may also reflect their experiences of loneliness. Higher loneliness is more common among those who frequently communicate one-to-

one online with strangers (42%) or online-only friends (32%) than among those who frequently communicate with in-person friends or family members (24% each). These relationships remain statistically significant even after accounting for demographic characteristics and other online communication patterns.

The study also examines how young people cope when they feel lonely. Compared with those experiencing lower loneliness, young people with higher loneliness are more likely to scroll through online content, spend time alone offline or connect with someone online when feeling lonely. By contrast, spending time with someone in person when lonely is reported at similar rates across the two groups. These findings highlight differences in how young people respond to loneliness, but they do not establish whether these behaviors contribute to or result from feelings of loneliness.

“Whom young people connect with online matters when considering loneliness, but the direction of that relationship is not always clear,” said Andrew Dugan, principal researcher at Gallup. “Young people experiencing greater loneliness also tend to turn more often to online and solitary activities when they feel lonely. Understanding their broader relationships and social experiences is important to making sense of these patterns.”

Where AI Fits Into Young People’s Social Lives

Artificial intelligence has become a regular part of many young people’s online lives, with young people most commonly using it to seek information (82%) or advice (68%). Additionally, about one in three young people report using the technology as a social companion or friend (33%). AI companionship is most common among young people who feel obligated to be constantly available online, who report higher anxiety, or who lack a close in-person friendship or a strong relationship with a parent or caregiver.

Young people who use AI as a social companion or friend are substantially more likely to experience higher loneliness than those who do not, even after accounting for friendship quality, satisfaction with in-person social time and other characteristics. The findings are observational, however, and do not establish whether young people turn to AI because they feel lonely, whether AI companionship influences their social experiences or whether other circumstances explain the pattern.

Implications for Young People’s Wellbeing

According to the report, offline relationships are closely tied to how young people evaluate their lives. High-quality in-person friendships are associated with nearly twice the adjusted odds of thriving compared with having no in-person friendship, while higher loneliness declines from 32% among those with low-quality in-person friendships to 21% among those with high-quality ones. Higher-quality friendships also tend to go together: Young people with high-quality in-person friendships are more likely to have stronger offline-to-online and online-only ones as well.

More frequent short-form scrolling is also associated with slightly lower life ratings. These findings suggest that although digital spaces offer additional ways to form and maintain relationships, in-person friendships and other supportive relationships remain central to young people’s wellbeing.

About Boston Children’s Digital Wellness Lab

The Digital Wellness Lab is a nonprofit research center seeking to understand and promote positive and healthy digital media experiences for young people, from birth through young adulthood. Based at one of the nation’s leading pediatric hospitals, the Lab builds an evidence base for digital wellness by conducting and translating rigorous research on the effects — both positive and negative — of technology use.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining 90 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.