

“It’s a window to the outside world. . .” Perspectives From Minority Youth in Aotearoa New Zealand on the Impact of Media and Technology on Their Wellbeing

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Abstract

This study investigated the perspectives of young people aged 12–18 years from minority communities in Aotearoa New Zealand on how media and technology influence their mental health and wellbeing. Adopting a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach, we conducted 19 focus groups ($n=77$) with young people from Māori, Pacific, Deaf, or Rainbow (LGBTQIA+) communities. Thematic analysis identified six overarching themes: (1) constant device use; (2) diverse device use for distinct and related purposes; (3) positive aspects of device use; (4) negative aspects of device use; (5) young people have the solutions for young people; and

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(6) young people have the solutions for adults. These themes highlight the complex and multifaceted ways digital media and technology shape the mental health and wellbeing of underserved young people, and point to actionable strategies and policy recommendations, grounded in the lived experiences of those most affected—young people themselves.

Keywords

participatory research, youth, minority communities, media, technology, wellbeing

Introduction

The impact of digital media and technology on young people has become a growing concern, often fueling debates that frame these influences as detrimental to mental health and well-being. Globally, the omnipresence of devices has led to perceptions of young people as distracted and glued to their screens. In response, many adults and government bodies are seeking to limit or control media to protect young people from potential harm. However, these approaches frequently overlook a crucial aspect: the perspectives and experiences of young people themselves. Far from being passive consumers of digital media and technology, young people hold nuanced views on the role of media and technology in their lives. Given that this generation of young people (Generation Z) will continue to navigate an increasingly digital world, their voices are crucial in shaping both the present and future of digital media and technology.

For the purpose of this study, we intentionally use the broad term “digital media and technology” to reflect that young people’s digital media experiences are not limited to a single platform or medium but likely span a range of interconnected devices and content types. In our focus group interviews, we structured our discussions around commonly used devices such as cellphones, tablets, laptops/computers, television, video games, and music, to capture the breadth of young people’s digital media and technology experiences.

While there is a growing body of qualitative research centering youth voices in the context of digital media and mental health (e.g., Davis et al., 2025; Madden et al., 2024; Shankleman et al., 2021; Weinstein & James, 2022), much of this work has focused on majority populations of specific geographic regions. A key contribution of this paper is its focus on the perspectives of young people from underserved communities, specifically from Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow (LGBTQIA+) young people in Aotearoa

New Zealand, whose voices remain underrepresented in the existing literature (see Davis et al., 2025 for a discussion of persistent gaps in youth digital wellbeing research). Additionally, we report on the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodological approach adopted for this study, which places young people at the heart of the research process, ensuring that their perspectives are meaningfully integrated at every stage—from research design to data collection and interpretation. We have utilized the checklist for reporting research with adolescent and youth engagement (Nagata et al., 2025) to demonstrate when and how young people were meaningfully involved in this project (Supplementary Material Table 1). This study not only sheds light on the critical themes emerging from young people's experiences but also addresses the generational gap between researchers and digitally native young people, emphasizing the need for research practices that truly resonate with this younger generation.

Media, Technology, and Young People's Mental Health and Wellness

The intersection of digital media, technology, and young people's mental health has gained significant attention in recent years, with numerous studies exploring both the benefits and potential risks of young people's use of digital media and technology. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses of quantitative data have reported mixed findings (Keles et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Orben & Przybylski, 2019; Sala et al., 2024; Tang et al., 2021), highlighting that the relationship between young people's media use and mental health is far more nuanced than public discourse suggests. While excessive passive media use, such as mindless scrolling and constant device-tasking, has been associated with negative outcomes like anxiety, sleep disruption, and diminished well-being (Girela-Serrano et al., 2024; Yu et al., 2024), other studies emphasize the potential for digital media and technology to promote social connections, learning, and self-expression (Best et al., 2014; Domahidi, 2018; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Despite the important insights offered by these systematic reviews and meta-analyses, the complexity of the relationship between young people's media use and mental health remains compounded by the limitations of quantitative research methods, such as the use of cross-sectional versus longitudinal approaches, and varying measures to assess young people's device use and mental health outcomes.

Much of the existing literature has focused on adult conceptualizations of risk, often portraying young people as passive consumers who need protection from digital harm (Stoilova et al., 2021; Vissenberg & D'Haenens,

2020). This perspective overlooks the agency of young people in navigating their digital environments. However, a growing body of qualitative research has made considerable contributions to our understanding by prioritizing young people's perspectives on how digital media and technology influence their mental health and wellness (Madden et al., 2024; Popat & Tarrant, 2023; Shankleman et al., 2021; Weinstein & James, 2022). A recent review of twenty-four qualitative studies examining adolescents' 13–17 years old perspectives on the impact of social media on their mental health and wellbeing identified five main themes (Popat & Tarrant, 2023). Specifically, young people described social media as a platform for self-expression and validation, while also feeling overwhelmed by appearance comparisons and body ideals. They noted the pressure to always stay connected, saw social media as a means for social engagement and peer support, but recognized the risks of cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content. The findings of this review demonstrate that young people have a deep understanding of how media and technology affect their mental health and wellbeing, often expressing ambivalence—acknowledging both the positive and negative aspects of their media use. These findings were supported by an earlier systematic review and meta-synthesis by Shankleman and colleagues (2021).

Despite these important contributions to this topic, there remain notable gaps in the literature regarding the inclusion of young people's voices, particularly from underserved and minority populations. As Davis and colleagues (2025) highlight, while researchers are increasingly incorporating youth perspectives, not all youth voices, particularly those from diverse cultural, linguistic, and identity backgrounds, are currently well represented in qualitative or quantitative studies. Most existing studies have focused on majority populations or specific geographic regions, with limited attention to the experiences of underserved young people. This study aims to address these limitations by specifically focusing on young people who identify with an underserved community (Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow communities) and who are located across both the North and South Islands of New Zealand.

A further limitation in the current literature is the lack of researcher reflexivity (Shankleman et al., 2021). Researcher reflexivity is the ongoing process of critically reflecting on one's own role, assumptions, and potential biases throughout the research process, and is essential for ensuring that the perspectives and experiences of participants are accurately represented (Shankleman et al., 2021). This is particularly crucial when working with underserved youth, whose voices have historically been marginalized or misinterpreted by others who may not share their backgrounds or lived experiences. In this study, researcher reflexivity was a central component at each stage of the research process.

Examining digital media use in underserved populations is valuable because other research has found that minoritized individuals tend to use digital media in different ways than majority youth. Online spaces often allow for opportunities for underserved and minority youth to increase belonging (Coyne et al., 2023; Nsude et al., 2023; Paglieri et al., 2023). Entire social movements, such as #Blacklivesmatter, that highlight racism or other inequality have been sparked through online media (Moran & Gatwiri, 2022). However, online spaces are often vehicles for increased victimization in terms of racism (Agudelo & Olbrych, 2022), ableism (Heung et al., 2022), and homophobia and transphobia (Singh & Motlíček, 2022). Indeed, research often finds that minoritized youth have the greatest benefits, but also the greatest risks in terms of using digital media (Madden et al., 2024).

Digital media use in Aotearoa New Zealand may appear different from that in other countries. For example, the bicultural foundation, with a strong emphasis on Māori language and traditions, shapes platform content, evident in campaigns like Māori Language Week, Toitū Te Treaty (Honor the Treaty), and other indigenous advocacy, which are less common in nations without similar cultural dynamics (Moeke-Maxwell et al., 2020; Smith, 2015). Despite being a small, highly connected population, digital media fosters civic engagement and inclusivity, amplifying progressive movements like climate advocacy and LGBTQIA+ rights, in contrast to restricted discussions in some global regions (Bandopadhyaya & Kenixm, 2022). However, most research on digital media in Aotearoa New Zealand is conducted on adults in majority populations (e.g., Pacheco, 2023), leaving us with little understanding of those in underserved populations in the country. We have chosen to focus on Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow communities because these underserved populations continue to be overrepresented in statistics of poor mental health and wellness in Aotearoa New Zealand (UNICEF Innocenti, 2025)

Media Panics

The discourse surrounding digital media use by young people is often dominated by concerns influenced by public perception, rather than robust empirical evidence. While recent studies show small associations between social media and depressive symptoms in adolescents, the way these findings are communicated to the public, practitioners, and even adolescents themselves can amplify fear rather than reflect the actual magnitude of risk (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Odgers and Jensen (2020) stress the importance of grounding policies, parenting and educational practices, and public health responses in evidence rather than fear-driven narratives, particularly when the

associations between young people's digital media use and mental health are small to negligible. This also speaks to a broader issue of how the impact of digital media and technology on young people is frequently exaggerated, leading to reactionary measures such as unrealistic bans and restrictions that may not address the nuanced ways in which digital media affects young people. This is particularly problematic given the generational divide that commonly exists between the young people affected by these policies and the adults who create them.

As Drotner (1999) explains, these anxieties often manifest as "media panics"—a form of moral panic that arises with the introduction of new technologies. Media panics are typically emotionally charged, polarized debates, with media framed as either inherently good or bad, and young people portrayed as vulnerable and in need of protection. The conversation is primarily adult-led, and therefore, may more accurately reflect older societal reactions to emerging technologies, wherein adults express fears over the unknown, while young people are viewed as passive consumers rather than active agents navigating the digital landscape.

Recent global trends reflect this panic, as seen in the growing implementation of digital media restrictions and bans. According to the recent report by Digital Futures for Children (Rahali et al., 2024), one in seven countries has implemented policies to limit or restrict young people's access to smartphones in schools. Some countries, including Australia, have gone further, with calls and laws passed banning social media for young people under the age of 16 (Radio New Zealand, September 2024). These restrictions and bans are based on the belief that reducing digital media exposure will protect young people from harm, yet they overlook the complexities of digital media use and its diverse impacts on young people's mental health and wellness. A more nuanced approach, one that differentiates between types of digital media engagement and intently listens to young people's experiences—particularly those from underserved communities—is crucial to developing effective and relevant strategies to support young people to be healthy users of digital media and technology. Involving young people in shaping these policies ensures that the responses align with their actual needs and lived realities, rather than the assumptions of older generations of adults.

Underserved Youths' Perspectives on Topics That Impact Them

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an equity-driven methodology that positions young people as co-researchers in identifying and addressing systemic issues affecting their communities (Ozer et al., 2020). Unlike traditional Community-Based Participatory Research, YPAR explicitly centers

adolescent agency through structured power-sharing, such as collaborative data analysis and advocacy. YPAR is particularly effective for engaging underserved young people because it positions them as experts on their own lives, encouraging them to identify and address issues that adults may overlook (Smith et al., 2024). Through authentic power-sharing between young people and adults, YPAR not only enhances the voices of underserved youth but also builds leadership, critical thinking, and advocacy skills to drive meaningful change (Gray & Ren, 2024). For example, YPAR has been used with Latinx adolescents to address mental health stigma via peer-designed interventions (Smith et al., 2024) and with African American students advocating for equitable physical activity resources (Abraczinskas & Zarrett, 2020). By centering youths' lived experiences, YPAR generates culturally valid insights and fosters civic empowerment, making it a critical methodology for research *with*, rather than *on*, underserved communities (Abraczinskas & Zarrett, 2020; Smith et al., 2024). This is especially important in the context of digital media and technology research, where the fast-paced evolution of these platforms means adults' perceptions can be disconnected from young people's lived realities (Megele & Malik, 2020). Thus, YPAR and other youth participatory methods are useful for capturing the authentic experiences and perspectives of young people.

Young people, particularly those from underserved communities such as Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow communities, face unique opportunities and challenges in both the online and offline worlds (Roy et al., 2023; Sutcliffe et al., 2023). The lack of representation from these groups in previous research is a significant limitation, as their voices are often missing from discussions that directly impact them. Russell Bishop (n.d), an Emeritus Professor of Māori Education, highlights the importance of relational, culturally responsive methodologies for Māori, noting that “what is good for everyone is not always good for Māori; but what is good for Māori is good for everyone.” This principle holds true for all underserved young people. By being responsive to the needs and lived realities of these young people, research can address the broader spectrum of their experiences, ensuring that findings are inclusive and applicable to a diverse range of young people.

Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study was to prioritize the voices of young people aged 12–18 years from underserved groups (Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow youth) from Aotearoa New Zealand, to gain a deeper understanding of how digital media and technology affect their mental health and wellness. Focus groups were conducted with these young people to center their perspectives and understand their lived experiences. By actively engaging young people in

the research process, this study empowers them to share practical strategies they believe can reduce harm and promote healthier digital media habits.

The participatory approach used in this study was youth-centered, involving both youth participants and young adult research assistants with lived experience as collaborators in the design, facilitation, and interpretation stages of the project. While the youth participants shared their perspectives through focus groups, the young adult research assistants, all of whom shared cultural or experiential perspectives with each of the underserved groups, supported the co-construction of knowledge and ensured that the research remained grounded in the realities of the underserved communities.

Evidence from underserved young people's perspectives on this topic is currently limited, making their involvement crucial to ensuring the findings meaningfully inform policies, practices, and research priorities. The use of participatory research principles not only provides young people with agency but also ensures that their insights are central to developing relevant and effective resources for both young people and caregivers navigating the digital environment, an urgent need recognized by seminal researchers in the field (e.g., Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Phippen & Street, 2021). This paper extends the field by representing the perspectives of a diverse sample of underserved young people on their perceptions and experiences of the impact of digital media on their mental health and wellness, using best practice guidelines for participatory research methods (Ballonoff Suleiman et al., 2024; Nagata et al., 2025)

Methods

This project adopted a qualitative YPAR participatory research approach to prioritize the voices and experiences of young people aged 12–18 years as experts on how digital media and technology affect their mental health and wellness. Participatory research involves co-constructing knowledge through partnerships between researchers and individuals with lived experience (Jagosh et al., 2012). In this sense, our focus was experiential because we were interested in what it is like to be a young person today saturated by devices, how they understand this, and the personal meaning and significance digital media has for them. This approach aligns with the theoretical framework of praxis, where for knowledge to have transformative impact, we must work together to co-create knowledge that comes from our diverse experiences, from cultures, from lived histories (Ledwith, 2020). Participatory research is a way to create space for diverse perspectives rather than a single dominant view (Ledwith, 2020). The extent of participatory involvement can vary depending on the resources available to the researcher, and Hart's (2008) and Rowland and

colleagues' (2024) work highlight different levels of this engagement, from tokenistic involvement to shared decision-making. In this study, the research was *adult-initiated and shared decision-making*, meaning the topic (i.e., digital media and technology and mental health and wellbeing) was set by the research team, but young adult research assistants and young people actively participated in all phases of the research beyond this. YPAR is distinct from other participatory approaches in that it intentionally positions youth as decision-makers and co-researchers throughout the research process (Ozer et al., 2020). YPAR traditionally involves young people in defining the research questions, collecting and analyzing data, and developing actions based on findings. In our study, we adapted the traditional YPAR model by setting the initial research topic but then collaboratively designed the research methods, data collection, analysis, and dissemination with young adult researchers and youth participants (see Supplementary Material Table 1).

Ethics Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the researchers' Institutional Ethics Committee (HREC 2022/154). Ethical considerations were central to this study, especially given its participatory approach and focus on sensitive topics related to digital media, technology, and mental health and wellness. Power negotiations began with the need for parental consent before young people could voluntarily participate, marking the first acknowledgement of the power dynamics inherent in research. Young people, while voluntary participants, were required to seek permission from adults, which subtly reinforced their subordinate position. Navigating these dynamics remained a critical focus throughout the study, as young people are often placed in subordinate positions based on their age (Fine et al., 2007). Fine and Torre (2021) argue that power negotiations occur in all research but are often left unacknowledged. In this study, however, it was crucial to actively address these dynamics. The young adult research assistants¹ and young people were positioned as the experts, while the adult researchers² adopted a learner stance, recognizing the value of the young people's insights and lived experiences.

To ensure that discussions of sensitive topics were handled with care, clear protocols were established with the young adult researcher assistants to ensure they were able to create a supportive environment, allowing young people to feel safe while engaging with potentially distressing material. Further, special attention was also given to working with underserved groups, including Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow communities of young people. Cultural responsiveness and ethical engagement were prioritized by ensuring

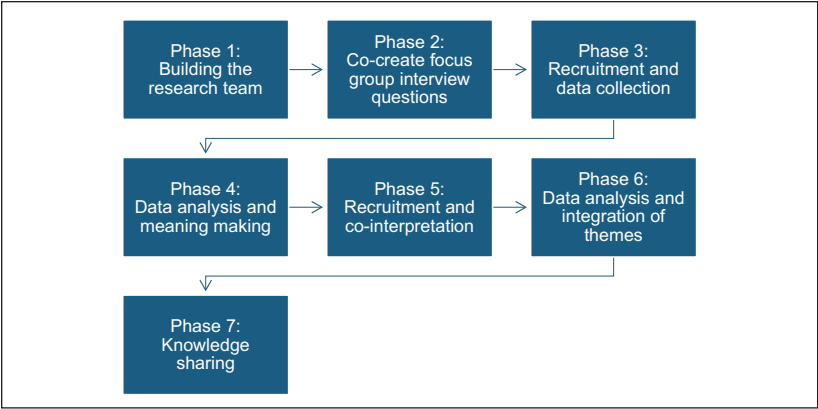


Figure 1. Overview of the research process.

that at least one member of the research team identified with each of the groups, fostering a more inclusive research environment.

Research Process

Figure 1 provides an overview of the research process, which included seven phases, each building upon the previous one. Informed by YPAR, this study was conducted iteratively and collaboratively, with young adult research assistants playing a central role in shaping each phase. The recruitment of these research assistants was one of the first steps, and their involvement was central throughout the research process. Once the research team was established, regular meetings were held to guide each phase of the study. Establishing whanaungatanga (relationships) and rangatiratanga (leadership, autonomy) among the research team was a priority during the initial phases of the study. This helped create a collaborative environment where the young adult research assistants felt safe to engage in the research process, sharing their ideas and taking ownership of the phases they were leading. Given that trust and relationship building are fundamental to participatory research (DeJonckheere et al., 2014; Grant et al., 2008) and research with underserved communities (Denford et al., 2024), these initial stages were crucial to the success of the project.

We used focus group interviews to gather young people’s perspectives, ensuring their voices were central throughout the study. Data analysis was carried out both individually and collaboratively within the research team. This collaborative approach fostered deeper insights from the data through

discussion and reflection between the young adult researcher assistants and adult researchers. Below is an explanation of each research phase.

Phase 1: Building the Research Team

To build the research team, we³ drew from our networks to identify young adults (aged 18–21) who were interested in the research topic and were active users of digital media and technology. These individuals had experience working with young people in advocacy roles, and importantly, the young adult research assistants included at least one member who identified with each of the underserved groups (Māori, Pacific, Deaf, or Rainbow). Their ability to connect and build relationships with diverse young people gave them an insider perspective, allowing them to understand youth subcultures, language, and engage with young people in relatable ways that adult researchers often cannot (Kellett, 2011; Ozer, 2016). These four young adults contributed as research assistants for this project, receiving ongoing training and support from the adult researchers throughout the research process. They played an active role in shaping the study by contributing to the development of the focus group questions, using their networks to recruit participants who identified with each of the underserved groups, facilitating and fostering a sense of whanaungatanga (relationships) and manaakitanga (care and support) during focus group interviews, and contributing to the analysis and dissemination of the findings. Their involvement was essential to ensure the study remained grounded in the experiences and voices of underserved young people, reflecting their realities and perspectives.

Positionality Statements

Researcher positionality frames a researcher's worldview and standpoint in relation to the topic of study (Rowe, 2014). As part of whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building), we introduce ourselves and our shared commitment towards inclusivity, knowledge building, and learning alongside others, including young people from underserved communities.

Cara (she/her): As an adult researcher, I do not directly identify with the underserved communities represented in this study. I approach this work as a learner, ally, and friend. These relationships have been foundational to my personal growth as a researcher and my commitment to inclusive, collaborative practice. Central to my work is the belief that young people should have meaningful opportunities to voice their perspectives on issues that impact them.

Jennifer (she/ia): I am Māori woman (nō Ngāti Whātua, nō Ngāpuhi tōku whakapapa) who is hard of hearing, a second-language speaker, and a long time ago, a rangatahi Māori. This work recognizes collaborative research practices that are designed to center rangatahi voices and have become more critical to the research space. However, as an adult researcher, I recognize my difference in age, experiences, and institutional privilege create blind spots for me.

Aaron (he/him/his): He uri ahau o Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Pāhauwera, Ngāti Rongomaiwahine, Ngāti Mahuta me Ngāti Tahinga. My whakapapa connections to He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tireni and Te Tiriti o Waitangi are as a direct descendant of Te Hāpuku, te ika nui o te moana. My background involves working with rangatahi and tāne Māori in the voluntary sector, including kapa haka, mau taiaha, and performing arts/theatre. As an adult researcher, I work in public health and health promotion contexts.

Okī: My roots go back to Satalo, Falealili, and Taelefaga, Fagaloa in the beautiful island of Samoa. My involvement in this study has been as a young adult researcher, to support the qualitative data collection, especially in relation to engaging with Pacific young people. Engaging in meaningful talanoa with the young people has offered an opportunity to reflect on best practise and highlight the need to value and recognize the incredible insights which lie with our young people.

Finn: Ko Kai Tahu tōku iwi. Ko Finn Barclay ahau. I completed my undergraduate degree in Ōtakou with a Psychology major and a Māori studies minor. I was brought into this project as a young adult researcher to work alongside Okirano during the recruitment and data collection process. As a tane Māori, I held a specific focus on connecting with Māori rangatahi during this qualitative data collection process.

Rosa: At the time of the research, I was an undergraduate student and served as the President of Te Aka Toki, the Indigenous Collective at the University of Canterbury. My leadership, grounded in my perspectives as a young adult researcher, was instrumental in aligning the project's aspirations with the principles of youth-led research. I worked to foster relationships within the community to ensure the meaningful implementation of a research design.

Kirsten (she/her): I am a young adult researcher on the project, completing my master's thesis. I do not directly identify with the underserved communities represented in this research. I approach this work with a commitment to understanding and supporting the communities involved, deeply valuing the privilege of hearing their experiences. Engaging with these communities has been instrumental in fostering

my own reflective practices and deepening my understanding of the importance of inclusive approaches to research.

Sarah: I am approaching this work as a White, hearing woman from the United States. I have spent considerable time in NZ, but this does not make me an expert in underserved populations, and I have much to learn. I approach this work as a learner and an ally. I do research on social media among minoritized youth in the United States (including sexual and gender identity) and hope to offer expertise here.

Phase 2: Co-create Focus Group Interview Questions

The research team engaged in a collaborative brainstorming session to share thoughts, experiences, and ideas about digital media, technology, and their impacts on mental health and wellness. The first author sourced relevant questions from existing literature on similar topics to inform the development and refinement of initial focus group interview questions that resonated with the young adult researcher assistants. To ensure the questions were effective and meaningful, they were piloted with two groups of young people (one Māori and one Pacific) known to the young adult research assistants. During these pilot sessions, the young people were encouraged to suggest additional questions they felt should be included in the focus group interviews. The research team debriefed after each of the pilot sessions, where young people's feedback was incorporated and the questions were further refined, leading to a final set that was agreed upon by the research team (refer to Supplementary Material for the final set of focus group interview questions).

It is important to note that the focus group interviews were designed to be flexible and semi-structured, allowing for adaptability in questioning and acknowledging the diverse experiences and perspectives that young people bring to the topic. Further, during the data collection period, new digital media restrictions were frequently discussed in the media, and sometimes implemented (e.g., phone bans in schools), making it essential for our questions to remain relevant and reflective of current issues. To facilitate this adaptability, young adult research assistants received training on how to ask additional clarifying questions and gather further information about participants' responses. This training aimed to enhance the quality of data collected, ensuring that the insights and experiences of young people regarding the impact of digital media and technology on their mental health and wellness were thoroughly captured.

Phase 3: Recruitment and Data Collection

Our recruitment strategy focused on engaging young people, aged 12–18 years old, who actively engage with digital media and technology and

identify with at least one of the underserved communities. Our focus on a broad range of digital media and technology (i.e., cellphones, tablets, laptops/computers, television, video games, and music) ensured that all young people met the inclusion criteria as engaging with digital media and technology, particularly given the high rates of device use in young people in Aotearoa New Zealand (King-Finau et al., 2021). This was confirmed by our data, whereby 85% of young people reported owning their own cellphone and/or laptop, with all young people owning at least one of these devices. Recognizing the importance of trust and relationships in participatory research, we used a snowball sampling approach. Young adult research assistants tapped into their networks with schools, churches, sporting groups, friends, and family to recruit participants. To ensure diversity and reduce potential sampling bias, we intentionally recruited from a wide range of networks across both the North and South Islands of Aotearoa, New Zealand. This method effectively helped us recruit participants from four underserved communities across Aotearoa New Zealand. A total of 58 young people across 15 focus groups participated in the initial focus groups. Detailed demographic information for each underserved group is provided in Table 1.

Focus groups comprised of 3–6 participants each, which aligns with best practice recommendations for this methodology (Krueger & Casey, 2014). It was important that participants were known to one another, particularly when working with underserved communities. Establishing rapport and relationships within each group was a priority before beginning the focus group discussions, as it created a supportive and comfortable environment for young people to share their perspectives and experiences. To further foster this, the young adult research assistants demonstrated *manaaki* (extending respect and hospitality to others) by providing snacks to share.

In person data collection was prioritised to create an interactive environment and facilitate richer discussions. All focus groups were conducted face-to-face, except for two rainbow focus groups, which were held online via Zoom. This decision was made based on participant preference, as it was logistically challenging to coordinate a suitable time and location for all rainbow participants to meet in person, especially given the need to rely on parental transportation. To ensure we had a representative sample from each underserved community, the young adult research assistants travelled across the North and South Islands, focusing on organizing one or two focus groups in main city regions (Christchurch, Dunedin, Wellington, Auckland) for each underserved community. These focus groups took place between April and September 2023.

Each focus group session was audio recorded with young people's permission and lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. During the Deaf focus groups, an

Table 1. Demographic Information About Participants Who Engaged in Initial Focus Group Interviews.

N of focus groups (n participants)	Māori	Pacific	Deaf	Rainbow
	3 (n = 13)	6 (n = 24)	2 (n = 8)	4 (n = 13)
Age range	12–15	12–15	13–18	12–15
Pronouns	58.3% she/her 33.3% he/him 8.3% they/them	64% she/her 35% he/him	37.5% she/her 62.5% he/him	38.5% she/her 38.5% he/him 23.1% they/them
Ethnicity	NZ European/ Māori, Ngāi Tahu, Ngā Puhī, Ngāti Kahungunu	Samoan, Samoan/Fijian, Tongan, Māori/Cook Island/NZ European, Samoan/ Tongan, Cook Island/Samoan, Cook Island/ Māori (Ngāi Tūhoe), Māori/Tokelaun/ Samoan/Asian (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāi Tūhoe), Samoan/NZ European	NZ European, Māori/Cook Island, Filipino, Māori, NZ European/Māori, Syrian	NZ European, NZ European/ Māori, South African/ NZ European, Chinese,
Intersectionality	Māori and Rainbow	Māori and Pacific	Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow	Māori and Rainbow

interpreter was present and signed each of the facilitator's questions and voiced the participants' responses. To express our appreciation for their contributions, young people received a koha (a token of appreciation in the form of University merchandise) from the research team. This gesture not only acknowledged their time but also reinforced our commitment to honoring their involvement in the research process. In line with our participatory approach, we consulted with young people known to the research team, as well as the young people involved in the pilot, to select appropriate snacks and koha. Their feedback guided our choices, ensuring that the offerings were meaningful and well-received by young people.

Phase 4: Data Analysis and Meaning Making

Following each focus group, the first author debriefed with the young adult research assistants to discuss key themes emerging from the focus group discussions. These debrief notes served as an initial familiarization tool, helping the research team to gain a preliminary understanding of the key insights being voiced by young people. We followed Braun and Clarke's (2021) six steps of thematic analysis, employing an inductive approach. That is, the codes and themes were entirely derived from the perspectives of youth. For the purpose of this study, rather than presenting the full results of the thematic analysis (which are too exhaustive for a single manuscript), we provide concise summaries of the main topics discussed in each section of the focus group interviews. These topic summaries offer a descriptive overview of the key areas of conversation, as they were raised by participants, to give readers an initial sense of the data.

The next step involved transcribing each focus group verbatim, with each transcript stored in a separate Microsoft Word document. The first, second, and third authors listened to and read each focus group interview transcript before coding the data by identifying relevant features and tagging these with a coding label. After coding each transcript using the comment function in Microsoft Word, the coded data was exported to Excel and later imported into Miro⁴, an online whiteboard platform that facilitates collaboration among researchers. This allowed the team to engage interactively with the codes derived from the data, using sticky notes to visualize and bring together the themes. The first iteration of the coding and meaning-making process involved the entire research team, ensuring diverse perspectives in the analysis. During this phase, an important insight emerged: young people expressed that they felt adults did not fully understand the online spaces they navigate daily. This, combined with the participatory approach adopted for this study, prompted us to engage in a second round of member checking to ensure that our interpretations of the codes and themes accurately reflected young

people's perspectives. However, due to funding constraints and the time that had elapsed between data collection and analysis, only two participants from the original cohort were willing to engage in this process. To address this limitation, the research team engaged in a co-interpretation process with groups of new participants from each underserved community.

Phase 5: Recruitment and Co-interpretation

In this second phase of recruitment and data collection, two new young adult researcher assistants joined the project. Although the original research assistants were no longer actively contributing, these new young adult research assistants ensured that the perspectives of young people remained central to the study and helped minimize the generational gap in knowledge. The second phase of recruitment and data collection took place during July 2024. As a research team, we revisited the codes and themes from Phase 4 and summarized the key findings to present to the new groups of young people. During this process, several topics and the language used by young people were vague, so further clarification was sought. These topics for deeper exploration included understanding what young people meant when they described feeling “addicted” to their devices, exploring the concept of “drama” and whether it manifests differently online versus offline, and gathering more specific feedback on strategies adults could use to help young people become healthy digital media users. Additionally, with the recent implementation of phone bans in Aotearoa New Zealand schools (New Zealand Legislation, October 2024) following a change in government leadership, this phase of data collection also aimed to assess how young people were responding to these new restrictions (refer to Supplementary Material for the final set of focus group interview questions).

Participants were recruited from a school known for its inclusive approach to social clubs and groups, including those supporting Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow young people. The first author already had established relationships with this school and was aware that they provided a supportive setting for engaging with diverse groups of young people. The same procedures for facilitating the focus groups were used as in Phase 3. A total of 19 young people across 4 focus groups participated in the co-interpretation focus groups. Demographic details for these participants are provided in Table 2.

Phase 6: Data Analysis and Integration of Findings

The same procedure as described in Phase 4 was used to process the data from the second round of focus groups. Each transcription was reviewed,

Table 2. Demographic Information About Participants Who Engaged in Co-interpretation Focus Group Interviews.

N of focus groups (n participants)	Māori 1 (n = 6)	Pacific 1 (n = 4)	Deaf 1 (n = 5)	Rainbow 1 (n = 4)
Age range	12–15	14–15	13–15	14–16
Pronouns	66.7% she/her 33.3% he/him	100% she/her	20% she/her 80% he/him	25% she/fae 25% he/him 50% they/them
Ethnicity	Māori/NZ European, Ngāti Maru, Ngāti Maniapoto	Tongan/ Samoan/ Fijian/NZ European, Tongan, Niuean/NZ European	NZ European, Australian, Māori/Cook Island	Māori/NZ European, Asian/Indian,
Intersectionality	Māori and Pacific	Māori and Pacific	Māori, Pacific, and Deaf	Māori and Rainbow

coded, and analyzed by the research team. The coding and thematizing from this co-interpretation phase were completed by the first three authors. The codes generated from this co-interpretation phase were then overlaid onto the existing codes and themes from the first round of data collection. This method of integrating the two sets of codes did not necessarily generate new themes, but it allowed for a deeper exploration and more nuanced understanding of certain topics that young people had highlighted as important. After completing the coding, the first three authors identified and agreed upon the larger overarching themes and created a summary of codes for each (see Figure 2). These overarching themes, described in the results section, were developed relatively early in the analytic process and were partially informed by the focus group interview questions. Thus, they provide a broad understanding of the data and are not intended to capture the depth or nuance of young people’s perspectives. It would be impossible to do full justice to the voices of young people within the scope of this paper alone.

Phase 7: Knowledge Sharing

To ensure the key findings reach those who work with and care for young people—such as educators, policymakers, and caregivers—the research team

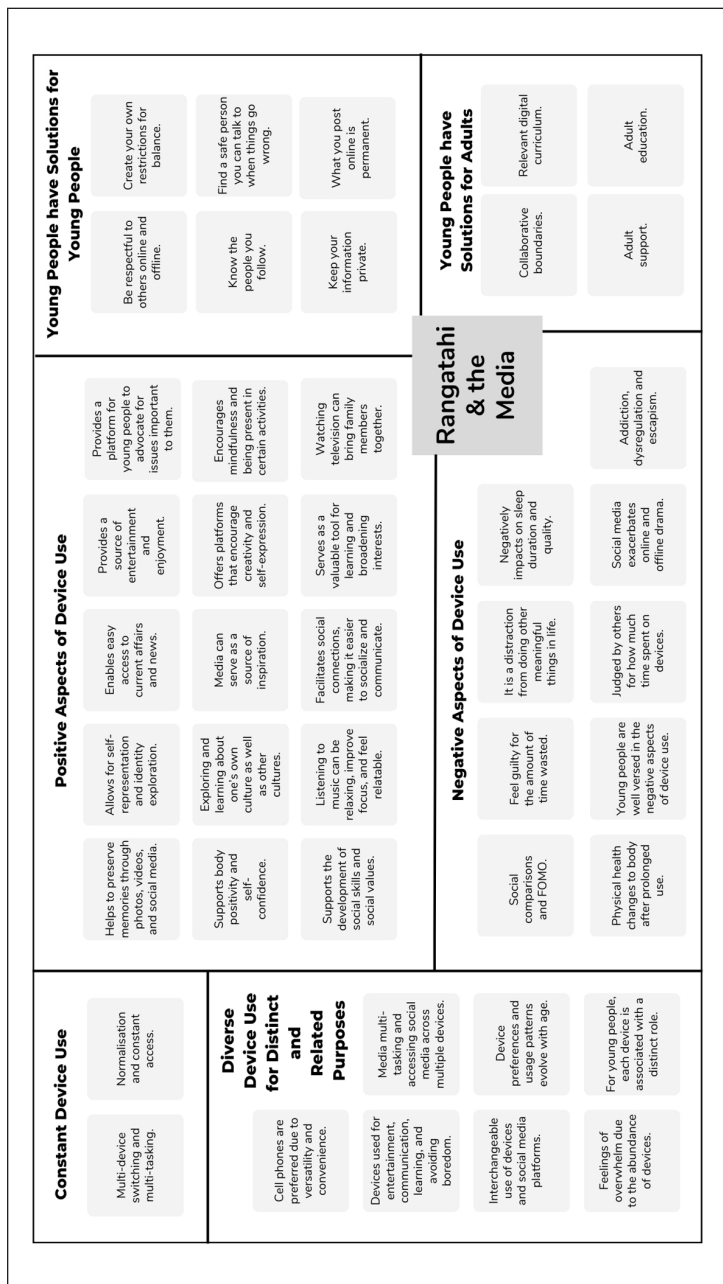


Figure 2. Overarching themes and coding summary.

is collaborating with young people to develop infographics and other visually engaging materials. These resources are designed to be appealing to young people and accessible to adults and caregivers. Additionally, it is important that the translational aspects of this project involve young people through co-design and co-facilitation. This is especially important given that the young people in our study expressed concerns about being misunderstood by adults. Engaging young people in the dissemination process not only empowers their voices but also enhances the relevance and impact of the findings in the real world.

Results

From the analysis of each of the focus group interviews (Phases 4 and 6), six broad themes were identified and confirmed by young people, reflecting their insights and experiences of ways in which digital media and technology impact their mental health and wellbeing. Each theme captures distinct aspects of the discussions and is supported by relevant codes. A summary of the codes associated with each theme is presented in Figure 2. The following sections describe each theme in detail, accompanied by supporting quotes from young people to illustrate their perspectives.

Theme One: Constant Device Use

Young people described *device use as an integral and constant part of their daily lives*, highlighting the ubiquitous role digital media and technology play in shaping their daily routines. Many shared that devices are “always on in the background,” creating a sense of continual connection to digital media and technology. This persistent engagement often led to internal conflict, with several acknowledging that while they are digital natives, they frequently grapple with wanting to disconnect. One participant remarked, “I don’t even know why social media exists” [Deaf Focus Group].

Despite their heavy engagement with devices, young people were often aware of the captivating qualities of digital media. Some admitted, “I use it more than I should,” suggesting an awareness of the all-consuming nature of digital media. One participant shared, “Yeah, I did an all nighter last night. . . I didn’t fall asleep. . . yeah, that’s what I mean, it’s addicting. . . because every time I’m like, oh okay that’s 30 [minutes] but then I see like a good video and it’s like, I get stuck in it again” [Pacific Focus Group]. This reflection was echoed by others who also found themselves scrolling endlessly, often losing track of time in a cycle of engagement driven by the appeal of content on social media, particularly TikTok.

Device switching was another frequently mentioned behavior, with young people jumping between multiple devices throughout the day. This was a normal and common behavior among young people, with an underlying societal expectation that devices are—and should always be—accessible. This regularity of device access underscores the pervasive presence of technology in their lives, shaping not only the daily routines of young people but also collective social expectations and norms that influence their use of devices.

Yet, as one participant noted, this constant access can feel redundant, leading to device overload: “I feel like it’s just another device you have to use. . . I feel like sometimes you don’t need that many devices” [Māori Focus Group]. This sense of saturation by devices reflects the balance young people seek between necessity and the excess of technology in their lives.

Theme Two: Diverse Device Use for Distinct and Related Purposes

Young people frequently engaged in *diverse device use, often utilizing multiple devices at once, each serving distinct but sometimes overlapping purposes*. Cellphones were favored for their versatility, accessibility, and convenience, particularly for social communication and entertainment. Many participants highlighted the ease of switching between social media platforms and apps on their phones, reinforcing their role as a go-to social tool.

When asked why cellphones are so important to young people today, participants shared comments like “It’s a man’s best friend. . . that’s why I use it” and “It’s like the first thing you get when you wake up. . . I message everyone good morning” [Deaf Focus Group]. Young people emphasized that phones are accessible, multifunctional, and “always in your pocket. . .you can use it anywhere” [Māori Focus Group].

In contrast, laptops were primarily used for learning, with young people noting they preferred to use laptops for schoolwork. Young people also explained how different types of digital media and technology serve specific purposes, depending on the context. When asked about their favorite platforms or apps, one participant stated, “It depends on what I’m doing” [Pacific Focus Group]. Another participant also commented, “See, the computer, the [video] console, the cellphone, and music are quite connected and intertwined because I use all four quite often, but for multiple different scenarios” [Rainbow Focus Group]. This digital media multitasking, or “multi-devicing,” was common, with young people switching between devices like cellphones, laptops, tablets, and watching television, often accessing social media and entertainment from more than one device simultaneously. This

constant juggling of devices could become overwhelming, especially when managing multiple platforms or applications at once, or as this participant indicates, could help with staying focused: “Like with TV I kind of have to like, usually when I watch it, I draw something on my iPad at the same time so I can stay focused” [Rainbow Focus Group].

Over time, young people noted their preferences for certain devices and apps changed with age, reflecting shifting priorities and uses—ranging from avoiding boredom to staying connected socially. Device use was driven by both practical needs (e.g., staying in contact with parents) and the desire for entertainment (e.g., watching videos online), creating a dynamic relationship between their chosen device and activities. When asked about tablets, young people described a *tablet-to-phone pathway*, in which young children start out by using tablets and, as they grow older, transition to cellphones: “I had one [tablet] when I was like really young but then I got a phone, so I don’t use it anymore” [Māori Focus Group].

Theme Three: Positive Aspects of Device Use

Young people emphasized several *positive outcomes of device use*, often highlighting how technology fosters social connections, provides access to vast amounts of information, and inspires creativity. While these benefits were not always at the forefront of discussions, they were viewed as just as significant, if not more so, than the commonly discussed negative aspects of device use. Many young people noted that devices help them learn social skills, explore cultural values, experience validation of identity, and understand global issues. For example, one participant shared how watching Deaf people sign on TikTok made them feel validated.

Participant: I see Deaf people signing on TikTok, and they’re signing videos of songs or like just a tutorial of doing something

Interviewer: And how does that make you feel when you see that?

Participants: Quite happy because there’s people like me also out in the real world as well.

[Deaf Focus Group]

Social media was seen as a space for *self-expression and advocacy*, where young people could engage with topics important to them and represent themselves authentically. One participant expressed that social media could foster confidence, sharing, “I think a lot of people are afraid to reveal themselves. And I think social media sometimes helps to improve confidence”

[Rainbow Focus Group]. Devices were also used to preserve memories and stay updated with current events, making young people feel more connected to the world around them. Television was mentioned as a way to bring family members together for shared entertainment and bonding: “I only watch TV when I am getting together with my family and we’re watching a movie,” one participant explained [Pacific Focus Group]. Another participant highlights the joy of these shared moments, saying, “I think bonding with your family and friends, like all sitting there around in the lounge and you’re all watching the same thing, is a positive” [Māori Focus Group].

Music was frequently used as a tool for relaxation and focus, allowing young people a space to decompress and concentrate on tasks: “I kind of see it as like an escape from what’s going on, like a positive escape. . . you kind of just zone out when you’re listening to music. . . I usually listen to music, because it helps me focus. So, with my homework, I listen to music, and I can just zone out and get everything done” [Rainbow Focus Group].

For many young people, digital media and devices extended their interests, fostered learning, and offered creative inspiration, reinforcing the idea that device use has a meaningful role in their development and daily lives.

Theme Four: Negative Aspects of Device Use

Young people expressed concerns about the *negative aspects of device use*, particularly around addiction and the risks of encountering inappropriate or harmful content. Many reported feeling a sense of dysregulation, using devices as a form of escapism, only to later feel guilty about the amount of time wasted. One participant explained, “ Well, most people are addicted to their phones, like me. . . I always text my friends or check something like social media . . . and I just never stop. I never take my eyes off social media. Yeah, I just kind of feel guilty about it, but. . .” [Deaf Focus Group].

Exposure to inappropriate content, such as misinformation or discriminatory content, including racism or sexism, was common and troubling for young people. They also described social media as exacerbating both online and offline drama, contributing to feelings of social comparison, fear of missing out (FOMO), and cyberbullying. These negative interactions often left young people feeling judged for how social media drama spilled over into school, affecting school attendance and wellbeing.

Physical health issues, such as changes in posture and eye strain, were also noted after prolonged use, along with the financial strain of keeping up with expensive technology. Device use was seen as a distraction, pulling them away from more meaningful activities and negatively impacting their sleep

quality and duration. Quotes like “It cures boredom by giving you another illness, I guess?,” “Yeah, like brain rot” [Rainbow Focus Group] reflect the ironic downside of using devices as a tool to alleviate boredom, only to lead to new issues, such as ‘brain rot’. Young people expressed a desire to “be off my phone sometimes” to “live in the moment and enjoy life while we’re still young” [Pacific Focus Group]. Young people were well aware of these risks and challenges of digital media and technology, recognizing the fine balance between the benefits and harms of constant device engagement.

Theme Five: Young People Have the Solutions For Young People

Young people demonstrated a strong sense of agency when it came to managing their own device use, *offering practical solutions and advice for themselves and their peers*. They described how navigating rules and restrictions—whether imposed by schools or enforced by caregivers—shaped their digital behaviors. While some found these external boundaries helpful, others emphasized the importance of creating their own restrictions to achieve balance, such as monitoring screen time and being mindful of what they engage with online. As one participant shared:

“Be careful what you wish for because as much as it’s amazing having your own phone because you get the freedom, and you can contact people if something goes wrong. . . You also have to be very careful because you could think ‘oh, I’ll go on TikTok and watch some funny videos,’ and then, you see, really dark videos. Even having a parent not necessarily controlling your account, but just keeping it an eye on it. . .” [Rainbow Focus Group]

Young people stressed the importance of knowing the people they follow, keeping their personal information private, and being aware of the permanence of online activities. They advised peers to think carefully about what they post, showing respect both online and offline. In addition to self-regulation, they valued having trusted individuals to talk to when things went wrong—whether a parent, teacher, or friend—emphasizing the importance of support networks. Young people also shared practical solutions for balancing online and offline activities, such as setting time limits, prioritizing face-to-face interactions, and ensuring that technology use is purposeful rather than excessive.

Theme Six: Young People Have the Solutions For Adults

Young people provided thoughtful solutions for *how adults can better support them in becoming healthy media users*. They called on caregivers to provide

guidance, but in a way that supports their independence and helps them become responsible, healthy users of digital media and technology. They emphasized that for device-related rules and restrictions to be effective, they need to be collaborative, involving open communication and mutual understanding between caregivers and young people. Young people expressed frustration with inconsistent or overly strict rules and stressed the importance of adults being more aware and educated about the digital world, so they can offer relevant guidance.

“Making sure that they’re [adults] educated enough themselves, before letting the children go into social media, making sure that they know, like what that social media is about. . . Even if they have access to their child’s account, like just log in every couple of weeks, couple of months. . . and just make sure that their child is actually on track and not doing anything that they shouldn’t be” [Rainbow Focus Group].

One participant captured the difference in generational gaps in understanding social media, noting, “Like my parents. . . they do have some social media, but they don’t really understand what it’s like for our age. . . they think they understand but they don’t really. That’s not really how it works, mum” [Māori Focus Group].

Young people also called for a balance between online privacy and protection, acknowledging the need for some oversight from caregivers, without compromising their independence. They recommended that adults support them in setting boundaries and balance between online and offline activities by planning family time and encouraging screen-free activities.

Interviewer: What can adults do to support you to use digital media and technology in healthy ways?

Participants: I would say planning out more activities. . . so there’s less opportunity to partake in drama and addictions [online].

Or have more family time, like it could be we just watch movies together as a family.

[Māori Focus Group]

When discussing what they seek from a safe person they can talk to when things go wrong online, young people highlighted the importance of calm, open-minded responses, without escalation or judgment. Participants noted that overreactions from caregivers often deter young people from turning to them in the future.

Interviewer: What kinds of things are you looking for in a ‘safe’ person?

Participants: Not to escalate the situation, because it could be something you just found randomly, like searching up something. . .

So, being open-minded and just getting to the point being like, ‘you did that, like, what for?’ when they really should just listen and then try to understand your point. . . you should just understand your child’s point of view and what they were trying to do.

Because I just feel like that will just stress out the child more and. . . if you’re stressing out, your child probably won’t want you to be their safe person to talk to anymore because. . . you’re making it a big deal when they didn’t understand what they were doing.

[Māori Focus Group]

Young people advocated for the development and implementation of a digital curriculum that is meaningful to their online experiences, aiming for education around digital literacy that is both practical and engaging. They preferred this approach over the narrow focus adults often place on device restrictions. As one participant shared, “I feel like there’s other important situations, or like issues to be talked about, rather than phones and banning them” [Māori Focus Group], highlighting their belief that there are bigger or more impactful issues happening around them that need attention. Young people were clear that banning devices or imposing restrictive rules are not sustainable solutions; instead, they need guidance, support, and consistency to navigate the digital world in a healthy and responsible way.

Interviewer: How are the phone bans working for you?

Participants: We still go on our phones.

We all have tricks for it.

Banning is not going to fix the problem.

They will just find their own way.

It makes us want to do it more.

[Pacific Focus Group]

Discussion

This study examined the perspectives of young people aged 12–18 years from Māori, Pacific, Deaf, and Rainbow communities in Aotearoa New Zealand on how digital media and technology impact their mental health and wellbeing. Using focus groups within a YPAR framework, we prioritized young people’s voices, allowing them to guide the research process and share insights into their experiences with digital media and technology. Our

findings reveal the complex and multifaceted ways in which digital media influences the mental health and wellbeing of underserved young people in Aotearoa New Zealand, highlighting both opportunities for connection and support, as well as unique challenges and pressures. These findings offer a deeper understanding of the realities faced by these young people. Young people today are growing up in a digital world that is vastly different from that of previous generations. Unlike the adults who support them, they have never known a life without digital media and technology. A central theme from this study was that young people felt that constant connectivity is both expected and unavoidable. This was reflected in how device use is normalized from early childhood and reinforced by institutional expectations, particularly in schools where laptops and digital platforms (e.g., Google Classroom) are compulsory. These findings reflect broader trends in Aotearoa New Zealand, where youth have some of the highest rates of internet use globally (Cullen et al., 2024), suggesting a broader sociocultural context in which digital media use is the norm, not the exception.

Importantly, young people in this study did not position themselves as passive users of digital media. Instead, they demonstrated a nuanced awareness of both the benefits (e.g., using music to support focus and relaxation) and the risks (e.g., feelings of addiction and doomscrolling). While this recognition of the consequences of digital media use is reflective of young people's self-awareness, it also raises questions about the broader sociocultural factors that drive and sustain young people's excessive engagement with digital media. For example, participants described feeling pressure to stay constantly connected due to fear of missing out (FOMO) or falling behind on schoolwork, pressures that reflect not only peer norms but also educational structures that increasingly integrate technology (Camerini et al., 2020). Recent findings from Davis and colleagues (2025) also suggest that while social media is used by young people for emotion regulation, its design can counteract this intention, contributing instead to mindless scrolling and exposure to distressing content.

At the same time, our participants recognized the emotional and social affordances of digital devices and technology. For some, digital media was a source of comfort, validation, and connection that is not always available in their offline lives. For these underserved groups, the ability to see others like themselves represented online was especially important for identity development and pride. Studies with LGBTQIA+ communities also suggest that they find support, solidarity, and belonging on social media (Berger et al., 2022). Our findings demonstrate that these experiences may be extended to Deaf or hard-of-hearing and culturally diverse young people. These findings highlight that limiting access to online platforms could inadvertently harm

their mental health and wellbeing, potentially having a greater negative impact than we currently understand.

Contrary to the assumption that digital media erodes family connection, some participants described how technology facilitated family bonding. Shared activities like watching television or browsing family photos supported connection and nostalgia. While these findings suggest that digital media can enhance family closeness when used intentionally (Smith et al., 2021), alternative perspectives should be considered. For instance, Coyne and colleagues (2014) found that while co-viewing can facilitate some forms of connection, it is generally less effective at fostering meaningful connection and emotional closeness than activities that require direct engagement, such as playing interactive games, eating meals together, or having conversations (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). Furthermore, passive co-viewing may sometimes mask a lack of deeper interaction, with family members physically present but not engaging with one another (Nikken & Schols, 2015). Given that young people in this study described watching television together as a positive aspect of digital device use on their wellbeing, future research should continue to examine the qualitative differences in shared digital versus non-digital activities and their impact on young people's wellbeing.

Tablets were not frequently used by young people, as they argued they were more suitable for younger children. The *tablet-to-phone pathway* described by young people in this study reflects a developmental pathway of increasing digital autonomy and functionality. Unsurprisingly, most had received tablets in early childhood, and these were often abandoned when they received their first cellphone in later childhood or adolescence. Currently, much of the research and policy is directed at adolescent cellphone use, particularly in terms of restrictions, risk, and regulation. However, this may overlook the formative role that early tablet use plays in shaping young people's digital habits. Evidence suggests that digital engagement begins in infancy and toddlerhood, with tablets frequently used for entertainment, distraction, learning, and regulation (Mann et al., 2025). Thus, discussions regarding digital wellbeing should extend to early childhood and include critically examining the design features of children's applications and platforms, many of which are deliberately gamified, visually overstimulating, or contain advertising, and their potential influence on young people's attention and self-regulation over time.

Further, this early exposure to digital devices may also be a source of modelling and normalization, as discussed by young people in our study. For example, young people may be introduced to tablets in the context of family routines such as quiet time, during meals, or for entertainment, and are likely to observe parents' and siblings' digital device habits long before they engage with digital devices themselves. These early experiences may scaffold both

practical and relational understandings of digital media and technology, which may inform the expectations and patterns of digital media use that are observed later in adolescence. Longitudinal research is needed to explore the developmental transition from tablets to phones to better understand how early experiences with digital media shape adolescents' digital wellbeing. Such research could inform more developmentally sensitive policy approaches that move beyond blanket bans and restrictions to consider how to support healthy, age-appropriate digital device use from infancy through adolescence.

While acknowledging the positive aspects of digital media and technology, young people were equally articulate about its downsides. They expressed concerns about overuse, the potential for addiction, exposure to misinformation and inappropriate content, and cyberbullying. The negative experiences mirror existing research and justify societal concerns about the potential negative impact of digital media and technology on young people's wellbeing (Lissak, 2018; Shin et al., 2022; Sohn et al., 2019). These findings may reflect cognitive dissonance that young people experience when using digital media; they value the role of technology in their lives while simultaneously grappling with its harmful effects. These findings demonstrate the importance of moving beyond an overly simplistic narrative of digital media being either 'good' or 'bad', and instead fostering critical media literacy, co-regulation strategies, and inclusive digital design that better serve the developmental needs of young people, including underserved youth.

Young people in this study cautioned against an overemphasis on bans and restrictions as a primary strategy to protect them from digital harm. They viewed such strategies as oversimplified and out of touch with their lived experiences. Blanket phone bans, in particular, were seen as an abdication of adult responsibility to teach and support young people toward healthy digital practices. Rather than rejecting adult involvement, young people in this study called for more collaborative, respectful approaches. They expressed a desire for caregivers, educators, and policymakers to adopt a stance of curiosity rather than control. These findings echo research calling for more autonomy-supportive and developmentally responsive parenting and education practices (Campbell et al., 2024; Davis, 2023; Weinstein & James, 2022). Although young people recognized the significant influence of peers during adolescence (Albert et al., 2013; Koepke & Denissen, 2012), importantly, they also valued the support and guidance of adults, particularly when it respected and complemented young people's growing autonomy.

This need for more balanced, relationship-based responses also challenges the notion that the digital landscape is "too complex" for adults to understand or support young people. Media panic narratives portraying young people as

"digital natives" and adults as digitally illiterate may inadvertently contribute to adult disengagement or reliance on control-based solutions. Instead, our findings support growing evidence that best practice involves sensitive, developmentally appropriate engagement that balances guidance with respect for young people's growing autonomy (Davis, 2023; Weinstein & James, 2022).

This position is further supported by recent research. For instance, Goodyear and colleagues (2025) found that school phone bans in the United Kingdom did not lead to improvements in young people's mental health or academic outcomes as a result of the restrictions. This finding further supports the perspectives of participants in our study that restrictions and bans alone are unlikely to produce meaningful change without complementary efforts to build digital literacy, emotional regulation, and healthy digital media habits. Importantly, participants described a variety of self-regulation strategies they already use to manage their digital device use, including setting screen time limits, turning off notifications, and intentionally taking breaks from social media. These strategies align with broader research showing that impulse control and boundary-setting are key to preventing problematic digital device use (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; van Deursen et al., 2015). Involving young people in shaping solutions, rather than imposing them, is likely to lead to more sustainable, healthy media habits.

At the same time, placing the onus entirely on young people to manage their device use risks overlooking the role of technology companies in designing persuasive, immersive platforms that are developmentally inappropriate and intentionally disrupt self-regulation. While youth agency should be supported and respected, broader accountability, particularly from industry and policy stakeholders, must also be part of the conversation. This calls for a dual approach that ensures young people's solutions are not framed in isolation but considered alongside the systemic changes needed to safeguard their wellbeing.

Strengths, Limitations, and Methodological Reflections

Our participatory and iterative research process has demonstrated that underserved young people are highly capable of providing insights into their relationships with digital media and technology. They articulated both the positive and negative aspects of device use and proposed meaningful, solution-focused strategies. Most importantly, this study has demonstrated the value of designing research that allows underserved young people to express their perspectives authentically, free from prescriptive adult narratives. This inclusive approach has enriched our findings and aligns with broader goals of equity in research. Looking ahead, our participatory approach offers a flexible model that can be adapted by other underserved communities in Aotearoa

New Zealand and internationally, particularly for informing policy and practice around young people's digital media engagement. To support replication and sustainability, we have provided a detailed account of our research design and lessons learned, and we encourage other researchers and community groups to adapt and build upon this model in their own contexts.

A notable strength of the study was the inclusion of a second phase of recruitment, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This iterative approach allowed for deeper engagement with the data and provided an opportunity for the clarification and expansion of themes based on feedback from young people. Moreover, collaborating with young people challenged the research team to confront generational differences in knowledge and assumptions about digital media and technology. The involvement of young adult research assistants helped bridge this gap, ensuring that each stage of the research process remained grounded in the lived experiences of young people. Importantly, at least one member of the research team identified with each of the underserved groups. This diversity within the research team was critical for researcher reflexivity, as it enabled each phase of the research to be informed by insider perspectives and foster sensitivity to the cultural, social, and identity-based experiences of the participants.

Despite its strengths, our research approach was not without challenges. Recruiting and engaging underserved young people proved time-intensive. Accessing these communities required the research team to draw on established networks and invest in trust building (Denford et al., 2024). This was particularly important given the historical discrimination and exclusion that underserved communities have experienced. To address this, we diversified the research team and prioritized early relationship building. The involvement of young adult research assistants who shared cultural contexts and had existing connections with young people was crucial in ensuring each phase of the research process was both effective and culturally sensitive and respectful. Additionally, an unexpected finding in the demographics of young people was the intersectionality present within the underserved communities. While young people chose a single focus group to contribute to, their diverse identities and experiences brought multifaceted perspectives to the discussion, making it difficult to tease apart similarities and differences within and across underserved communities. We also acknowledge that conducting two of the Rainbow focus groups virtually may have influenced the group discussion. Another limitation is that our co-interpretation sample did not reflect the same geographic diversity as the initial focus group sample. This may have limited the range of perspectives represented in the final interpretation of the findings.

Reflecting on our methodology, it is evident that participatory research is not merely a research tool but a transformative process (Cornish et al., 2023).

As adult researchers, we were challenged to reflect on our assumptions about young people's capabilities and to reconsider the lenses through which we view their experiences. This collaborative approach has not only deepened our understanding of how digital media and technology impact young people's mental health and wellbeing but also fostered solution-focused dialogue and mutual learning between researchers and underserved young people.

Conclusion

This study highlights the importance and value of involving underserved young people as active partners in research. Their insights challenge deficit-focused narratives, offering instead a balanced perspective that acknowledges both the opportunities and risks of digital media and technology during adolescence. Through a participatory and iterative research approach, we bridged generational divides to identify meaningful, solution-focused strategies that reflect young people's lived experiences. These strategies offer caregivers and policymakers valuable guidance for supporting young people in developing healthy digital media habits.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings are available from the corresponding author, Cara S. Swit, upon reasonable request.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

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