

The Daily: Young people's evolving relationship with social media and how usage is at a crossroads

Audio

On today's podcast episode, we discuss in what instances Gen Zers prefer TikTok over Instagram, Snapchat's relevance for young folks, and how much we anticipate young people

will soon pull back from social media. Tune in to the discussion with our analyst Minda Smiley.

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Episode Transcript:

Marcus Johnson:

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Minda Smiley:

It's really everything from addictive features to online bullying to mental health concerns. So I think because it is pretty multifaceted in terms of the issues that the people are raising around young kids on these platforms, there's not going to be a one-size-fits-all solution, I don't think, to address some of these concerns.

Marcus Johnson:

Hey gang, it's Thursday, February 29th. Oh, hello, random day every four years. Minda and listeners, welcome to the Behind the Numbers Daily, an eMarketer podcast made possible by StackAdapt. I'm Marcus. Today I'm joined by one of our senior analysts based in New York. That may or may not be right. We'll find out in a second. It's Minda Smiley.

Minda Smiley:

Yes, that is correct.

Marcus Johnson:

Yes.

Minda Smiley:

In New York.

Marcus Johnson:

Figure it out, Johnson. Amazing. I nailed it. Lucky guess. Today's fact. Hippos can't swim.

Minda Smiley:

I mean, they are massive creatures, so that's-

Marcus Johnson:

They're not tiny.

Minda Smiley:

But then again so are whales, and I guess they swim, so I don't know.

Marcus Johnson:

Yes. So you see them like you see them just, they just peeking above the water. So basically the way they figure it out is they move through the water by walking along the bottom. In deep water they have to push themselves off the bottom, rise up, take a breath, and then they sink back down again. And then they can keep going. So they can't swim. But what's even more amazing is according to the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, hippos can sleep underwater. They use a reflex that allows them to bob up, take a breath and sink back down without waking up.

Minda Smiley:

That is so odd. Hippos are such bizarre animals.

Marcus Johnson:

Yes.

Minda Smiley:

Aren't they really nasty, like really mean?

Marcus Johnson:

They mean well, but they can, yeah, they're herbivores, so they're not trying to ... They're just trying to eat some salad and get on with their life. But if they're threatened, they will ruin your life.

Minda Smiley:

Yeah, I've heard that.

Marcus Johnson:

Yes, they will destroy anything in their way. But they mean well. They are nice. If they attack you, it's because you're trespassing and you should not be there.

Minda Smiley:

You're doing something you shouldn't be doing.

Marcus Johnson:

Yeah, but thus they can do that what. You thought sleep walking was impressive.

Minda Smiley:

Yeah.

Marcus Johnson:

Sleep swimming, under the water coming up for air.

Minda Smiley:

Hippos shocking us every day.

Marcus Johnson:

I know. I'm not sure they are. Do we know they're asleep? They just pretend. I don't know if they really are. That seems impossible. Anyway, today's real topic, young people's evolving relationship with social media.

In today's episode, we'll cover how young people's use of social media is changing. No in other news today.

So Minda, we're talking about those young folks and how they're using social media, how that is changing over time. And we'll start by addressing one of the questions that you tackled in some recent research. One of the most, I thought was interesting questions that you answered in the piece on Gen Z's social media preferences. And that question was: Which social activities did Gen Zers prefer Instagram over TikTok and vice versa? Gen Z, we should clarify, it goes up to 26. Who are the younger Gen Z people? Nine?

Minda Smiley:

I think for this research it was 15 to 26.

Marcus Johnson:

Okay, so 15 to 26.

Minda Smiley:

That was the methodology we used. It does seem to kind of differ-

Marcus Johnson:

Can vary, okay-

Minda Smiley:

... depending on. But yeah, teens and young adults, I guess it's fair.

Marcus Johnson:

Okay. So social activities that those folks, Gen Zers in this instance prefer Instagram over TikTok and vice-versa.

Minda Smiley:

We found that Gen Z prefers Instagram over TikTok for messaging or DMs. And that's interesting to note because messaging is becoming a really big part of social media. As we post less in general, as people kind of gravitate towards more private forms of communication, messaging is a big thing right now that we're seeing various platforms invest in. So it's a win for Instagram that Gen Z is kind of you know, that Instagram is their main platform for that.

And then Instagram's also Gen Z's go-to for stories, which is kind of ironic when you consider Snapchat invented stories and now Instagram is the go-to there. TikTok comes in third place there, which is not super surprising. I mean, TikTok stories only rolled out a few years ago. They haven't really seemed to invest a ton into the stories feature. But yeah, Instagram is still winning stories.

And then where TikTok is winning gets a little bit more complicated. For long video TikTok is more popular than Instagram, but the real winner here is YouTube, which again makes sense. YouTube is kind of the OG long form video platform, but we're looking at-

Marcus Johnson:

Yeah, gets forgotten about a lot though, YouTube, right?

Minda Smiley:

It does.

Marcus Johnson:

It's actually young people's most popular social media app, at least according to Pew Research. 71% of teens say they visit it daily. 58 TikTok, 41% Snapchat, 47 Instagram. But it does get forgotten about quite a lot. But in this instance, yeah, particularly for watching long videos, YouTube, it takes the crown, but TikTok quite a ways ahead of Instagram.

Minda Smiley:

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Kind of same thing with live-streaming. Gen Z chooses TikTok over Instagram for when it comes to live-streaming, our findings found. But again, YouTube is the most popular platform for live streams among this generation.

And then of course TikTok is Gen Z's undisputed go-to for short form video. But it is worth noting that yes, TikTok is kind of, when you think of short form, you think of TikTok. Gen Z is going to TikTok for short form. But I mean a lot of these copy cat features, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, we still found that the majority of Gen Zers have used those within the past month. So it's a feature that I think TikTok owns, but has certainly found success on other platforms.

Marcus Johnson:

Yeah. What I found really interesting as well was that these aren't really as close as you'd expect. They're going to specific platforms quite considerably, more so for certain things than others. There's at least a kind of a 10 at the very lower end of the spectrum to a 30 point gap in terms of picking one versus the other. Like watching stories, 78% going to Instagram, 45 for TikTok. Watching long videos, 50% going to TikTok, 20, call it 29% going to Instagram. So there's quite big variations between those two platforms.

Interestingly though, the same share, 75% of Gen Z folks with a smartphone will use both TikTok and Instagram. So in terms of the number of young people using both of those, it is pretty much neck and neck.

One platform that you quickly mentioned but folks listening might be thinking to themselves, "Okay, we're talking about Gen Z, we're talking about social media, why haven't they brought Snapchat up more already, even if they were at the beginning of the episode?" Where does Snapchat live in all this? In what ways are Snapchat still relevant for young people?

Minda Smiley:

Yeah, sure. I mean, Snapchat is always sort of an underdog, but there are a few areas where it does have an edge over some of the more popular platforms like Instagram and TikTok. For instance, Gen Z actually prefers Snapchat over TikTok for DMs, which does make sense. It is considered a messaging app, and it has been considered that for quite some time. Of course, they have a lot of other features, but that's kind of how it made its name I guess you could say.

And then Snapchat stories are also more popular than TikTok stories, which again, they did invent the feature. And TikTok stories are still a pretty young feature on the platform. But I think where Snapchat seems to be stumbling a bit is in the short form video space. We did find that Snapchat Spotlight, the company's TikTok clone isn't nearly as popular as TikTok Reels or YouTube Shorts. So they seem to be struggling a bit there.

Marcus Johnson:

Let's talk about a recent piece of news with regards to how people are starting to view social platforms and their effect on young people. And Cheyenne Haslett and Alexandra Hutzler of BBC News were writing that a group of the nation's top social media executives faced intense questioning from a United Senate committee the end of January about the mental health risks their platforms pose for young people, as well as accusations that their companies have failed to protect kids from exploitation and abuse.

We touched on this quickly on our Meta, Facebook celebrating its 20th birthday episode. But zooming out and encompassing all of social media, Minda, is social media and social media companies more specifically, is it at a crossroads when it comes to teens use of these platforms, do you think?

Minda Smiley:

I think we are certainly at a crossroads, and I have my reasons for thinking that. Do I think in terms of teenage use though, we're at a crossroads? That is a little bit of a stickier question. I mean, personally, I don't see, unless their parents or lawmakers frankly or the platforms

themselves tell them, make substantial moves to get them to stop using these platforms, I don't think they're going to.

I mean, I think it was Pew that recently came out with some research finding that the majority of teens use YouTube and TikTok every day with some saying they use it almost constantly. So I mean, with figures like that, again, clearly they want to be on it. They like to be on it I think without any kind of third party intervention, which could happen, whether it's legislation or something else. But in terms of them wanting to go off of it, I don't see that happening, if that's what you're asking.

Marcus Johnson:

I guess it could come from a number of people, it could come from them, it could come from their parents, it could come from lawmakers. And there are some decisions to be made by the courts. One of them is 41 states in DC filing lawsuits against Meta claiming the company's apps are addictive and harmful to children. So we'll see how that plays out.

There's Daniel Constantino writes for our briefing was noting the Florida House of Representatives has passed a bill that would ban children under the age of 17 from using social media, setting a stage he says, for the state senate to approve what would be the most restrictive social media law in the US. Will it pass? Will it stick? Will others follow? Who knows? But it does seem like there are some decisions that are going to be decided by the court soon.

Minda Smiley:

Yeah, I agree. I mean, there's certainly a lot in the works, but it's tough to say if and when change will really set in. I mean, the platforms are saying that they're making their apps safer for teens, but in reality, many people think they should be doing far more than they are. And the issues are really broad as well. When we talk about this, in the Senate hearings that happened last month, you can tell that there's not really one issue that's being talked about when it comes to child safety on these platforms. It's really everything from addictive features to online bullying to mental health concerns.

So I think because it is pretty multifaceted in terms of the issues that the people are raising around young kids on these platforms, there's not going to be a one size fits all solution I don't think, to address some of these concerns.

Marcus Johnson:

Yeah, yeah, it's a great point because protecting kids online and they're focusing on their privacy, making sure that they're not being advertised to is separate to the idea of addiction and something that the government might be able to say, "Hey, don't advertise to kids, protect their privacy." But saying, "Well they're addicted, they can't use it," is a separate question.

Part of the problem here, Minda, is that there's still a debate going on about clinical classification of digital addiction. And some folks say that social media is the idea that it's innately harmful is wrong. And so you do have young people using it. You do have, as you mentioned, there was that Pew study. 17% of the US teens on TikTok and YouTube saying they use it almost constantly. Around half are on those platforms almost constantly or at least several times a day according to Pew Research. That feels like addiction if you say you are on it almost constantly. Right?

Minda Smiley:

I agree. And I think those numbers are probably higher. 'Cause I mean, again, I think none of us really, I mean, I'm not a teenager, but I'm a person, and I think a lot of us don't like to admit how often we really are on these apps or we maybe convince ourselves, "Oh, I'm only on, I only check it a few times a day." And then in reality, we're checking them probably a lot more than we even realize, and then more than we would ever realize to say in a survey. So I mean, I would guess that these numbers are actually way higher.

Marcus Johnson:

Yeah. Some more research about addiction, social media. A study from the University of Cambridge showing basically half of UK teens feel addicted to social media. 57% of girls, 37% of boys said they felt addicted.

And then the addiction spins into the question or the concerns about mental health, and you have a few groups, a few folks who are raising those alarms more so now than ever it seems. A recent advisory from the US Surgeon General, Vikek Murthy, nation's top doctor warning we don't have enough evidence to say social media is safe. And in fact, there is a growing evidence that social media is associated with harm to young people's mental health. UNICEF saying excessive passive use of social media just scrolling through posts can have detrimental effects on mental health, research linking behavior to feelings of envy, inadequacy and reduced life satisfaction.

The problem with this is you can't. It's correlation, not causation. And so it's going to be really hard to prove that they are having a directly negative impact. But it does seem like the body of research just continues to grow. Part of the problem as well though, is that we know this, but we still continue to use the platforms.

Washington Post article from Tatum Hunter pointing out, 64% of US adults say social media has a mostly negative impact on life in this country. But more people, 72%, maintain at least one social media account according to Pew.

Minda Smiley:

Exactly. And I think what you're getting at is a lot of this is just, I mean, social media has gotten popular so quickly. I mean to think even that 15, 20 years ago, none of these platforms even existed, certainly not in the way they do now. And I think that's part of the issue with even the legislative aspect, is these lawmakers are trying to create laws around a subject that they're still trying to understand. There often aren't easy answers. Even the Kids Online Safety Act, which is one of the bigger pieces of legislation trying to make these platforms safer for children, it has its fair share of critics for various reasons. And yeah, I mean it's definitely a complex issue for sure.

Marcus Johnson:

Yeah. It's a heck of a moving target, and yeah, I'm glad you brought up KOSA, Kids Online Safety because everything needs an acronym, but Kids Online Safety Act is pretty prominent bipartisan bill. Few things that does disables addictive product features, would require social media platforms to perform annual independent audits, assessing risks to minors, would give researchers, academic researchers, nonprofits access to data sets or algorithms for study about the negative effects on minors. And that's been endorsed by a lot of folks. Minda, I hadn't realize. The Kids Online Safety Act endorsed by Common Sense Media, the American Psychological Association, the 5Rights Foundation, American Compass, Internet Accountability Project, et cetera, et cetera. So seems like that's got bipartisan support as well. So maybe that will come into effect sometime soon.

I want to get your take on something quickly before we move to our final question, and that is this argument that, okay, well, that's how kids socialize these days on social media. That's what they do. But there was a really interesting, two actually, economist pieces pointing out the striking feature of the new social media is that they are no longer very social.

It was saying inspired by TikTok, apps like Facebook increasingly serve a diet of clips selected by AI according to a user's viewing behavior, not their social connections, the piece explaining, now a new phase has begun. TikTok decided that. Rather than guessing what people would like based on their social graph, what friends and family liked, it would use their interest graph, which it inferred from videos that people like them lingered on. Rather than showing content created by people that they follow, it served up anything it thought they might like. And platforms that began as places for friends to interact and share their own content are turning into television like feeds of entertainment for passive consumption.

What do you make of this idea that social media is just an entirely different ballgame and we have to treat it as such?

Minda Smiley:

You mean in terms of how it used to? I just want to make sure I understand what you're asking because of with AI advancements or just generally?

Marcus Johnson:

I guess, because people will say, "Well, this is how kids interact now. This is how they socialize. This is the new phone call. This is the new MSN messenger."

Minda Smiley:

Oh, okay.

Marcus Johnson:

Then the point being made by this article that actually no, these are kind of mini TV like feeds with algorithms kind of pumping you with content.

Minda Smiley:

Yeah, I mean, I think, what do people always say? Every generation thinks the new technology is big and scary. I'm sure when TV came of age, people had their concerns. So I mean, it can be hard to tell in the context of the newest thing maybe always is going to seem the worst. But I mean, I do think if you're just looking at some of this stuff that has come from some of these platforms, again, going back to the hearing last month, kids have died or have just dealt with really serious issues. And again, I know it's complicated in terms of how much blame you put on the platform versus other factors. It's not always so black and white.

But I would argue that just saying that's how they socialize these days and that it's ... I think even if that's true, I still think we're dealing with a different, yeah, it does have this element of seriousness that, yeah, different animal, I guess is the word I was looking for, compared to maybe instant messaging or television or whatever.

Marcus Johnson:

Well, there's one number that really does highlight that point. Video share of average daily social network time. So put another way, of all the time you spend on social networks, how much of it do you spend watching video? And that number has gone from just over 30% to close to 60% from before the pandemic to today. So what we are consuming on social media does seem to be changing. It does seem to be more and more video. More and more video suggesting is less about you.

Now, you could argue that video is people posting about their lives, stories. But there is also research suggesting that people are posting less about themselves and more likely to passively consume content.

Let's end with this question Minda. Some people, it seems are taking a step back from social media. We'll talk about adults and teens in this question. Taking a step back for one reason or another. A few examples. Last year, John Legend and Selena Gomez publicly said that they were taking a step back from social media. Now, who cares if two people say that they are two celebrities? Selena Gomez has 430 million followers on Instagram. There's more people than there are in the country, in America. 66 million on Twitter. So as far as influencers go, she's up there.

Pacific Science Research from June to October of last year found 20% of US adults said that they had taken a break of over a month, half had up to a week. Number one reason was people were saying spread of misinformation. It's just too much for them.

And then last November, Nepal's government, Nepalese government actually banned TikTok saying it was disrupting social harmony in the country. So question is, what is the likelihood that we see a significant pullback from social media, particularly from young people?

Minda Smiley:

I don't see any real pullback happening. I mean, I think even the fact that people are taking breaks, a break implies that they eventually go back. Right? That's not a breakup.

Marcus Johnson:

True.

Minda Smiley:

People might take a week, a month off. They still are back. I do think, yeah, Selena Gomez taking a break. She's obviously a huge star with tons of followers, but so many other celebrities haven't taken a break. If anything, they've maybe leaned into it even more. I mean, look at-

Marcus Johnson:

Good point.

Minda Smiley:

A recent example was like Taylor Swift dropping her new album on. Social media played a big role in that and has for quite some time. So yeah, I don't know. I don't see adults or teens pulling back in any real way, unless, as I said earlier, they have to because of something bigger happening in the world. But I don't think anyone of their own volition is going to. What do you think?

Marcus Johnson:

Yeah, I think anecdotally it may feel that way. You may talk to people who say that they are. But it speaks to that research we said before. This many people say that it's bad for society, but even more people say that they have an account and use it often. Our numbers suggest that ... Our numbers agree with you. The numbers aren't ... The amount of time people are spending on these platforms is not going down. They have shown time spent with social networks amongst all people in America leveling off, currently an hour and 48 minutes per day among social network users. But it's only climbed three minutes per day since 2022. So it is flat, but it's definitely not going in the wrong direction. It's definitely not going ... Well, wrong direction is, I guess, subjective, but it's definitely not going down, let's put it that way.

Well, that's what we've got time for this episode. Minda's full report if you want to read all of her research on this topic, the title of the report is called Gen Z, Social Media Preferences: TikTok and Instagram are in a battle Over Stories, DMs and Video. Link is of course in the show notes, or you can head to insiderintelligence.com if you're a Pro person.

That's what we've got time for. Thank you so much, Minda, for hanging out today.

Minda Smiley:

Yeah, thank you.

Marcus Johnson:

Thank you to Victoria. She edits the show. James, who copy edits it. Thank you to him. Stuart, who runs the team, and Sophie who does our social media. Thank you to you too. Thanks to everyone for listening in. We hope to see you tomorrow for the Behind the Numbers Weekly Listen, an eMarketer podcast made possible by StackAdapt.