# Young People, Internet Use and Wellbeing; A Report Series Screen Time

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# Executive Summary

This report, the first in a series related to the relationship between digital technology and young people's wellbeing, draws from a survey sample of 6,620 young people from year 4 to year 13 across over 100 schools in the UK. The focus of this report is Screen Time – whether there is data to suggest the time spent online results in differences in attitudes and behaviours, specifically related to wellbeing.

Overall analysis on this large sample shows first that there are some young people who spend a lot of time online, a third of our sample spent over 3 hours a day online, and just over 10% declare that they spend over 6 hours online.

Through our analysis, we can see clear correlations between screen time and wellbeing, with some specific findings being:

- The older young people get the more time they spend online
- Males are more likely than females to be heavy online users
- Those who spend a lot of time online are more likely to see upsetting content, receive abusive comments, or send abuse to others
- Heavy online users are more likely to worry about how much time they spend online, and worry about what they have seen
- Heavy users are more likely to go online because they are lonely

There are some other indicative results that merit further investigation, such as:

- Gamers might generally spend a lot of time online but worry less about what they've seen or declare they go online because they are lonely
- Some young people spend very little time online yet still worry they use digital technology "too much"
- The definition of "upsetting content" for young people is very broad, and is more likely to relate to abuse by peers, animal harm, or even terrorism, rather than sexual content
- There are clear gender differences related to screen time, and differences related to wellbeing merit further investigation

Subsequent reports will conduct further analysis of this large dataset and will each be released with a specific focus, such as gender, age differences, and what harmful content means to young people.

# Introduction

SWGfL is a charity who works to understand how children and young people use technology, deliver effective resources to support schools in ensuring they can use technology in safely and provide thought leadership around education policy and practice related to online safety.

As part of its work with schools across the UK, SWGfL regularly embarks on survey work with schools with whom they are working, in order to collect baseline data on pupils, and also to compare the young people at the school with a national perspective.

In a series of reports, of which this is the first, we will explore specific aspects of the survey and the implications for these findings for educators and policy makers.

In this first report, we will consider the role screen time plays in exposing young people to online risk and related wellbeing issues. Screen time is an often-discussed but poorly understood issue. In our experience as professionals who work with many stakeholders (teachers, parents, policy makers, the wider children's workforce and young people themselves) we know there are many questions regarding the impact of screen time on young people.

# Methodology

The survey tool can be seen here:

https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ypinternet

The survey was constructed to collect basic information on:

- online usage (devices, kinds of activity, time online),
- upsetting content (both frequency and type of upset),
- issues related to abuse (saying or receiving abusive comments),
- the sorts of things that cause upset online,
- views related to online safety and wellbeing and
- controls of their internet use.

The survey was initially piloted with a primary and secondary school to determine the effectiveness and how understandable the questions were. While there were early revisions to the survey, it was launched in October 2012 and has had a stable question set since

then. While there have been new questions added since inception, there have been none modified or taken away.

Since launch we have collected responses from over 20,000 children and young people from over 100 schools. The current version of the survey can be seen here:

https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ypinternet

The survey is disseminated to schools prior to visits, and the schools run the survey in class so a broad cross section of respondents is reached. Since commencement of the latest version of the survey in February 2016 we have collected data from 6620 responses and it is from these responses that we present this analysis.

The survey is "live" and subsequent reports will analyse data from the most current data set to ensure the analysis is as up to date as possible. Given the breadth of data we have collected over the years, we will, in one of the reports, be publishing an analysis of how trends have changed over time.

# Demographics

Of those respondents, 47% were male and 53% female. The age range collected for the survey is broad (see figure 1), from year 4 (aged 8-9) to year 13 (aged 17-18). There is around a 50/50 split between those in primary education and those at secondary school. A subsequent report will explore differences between different age groups.
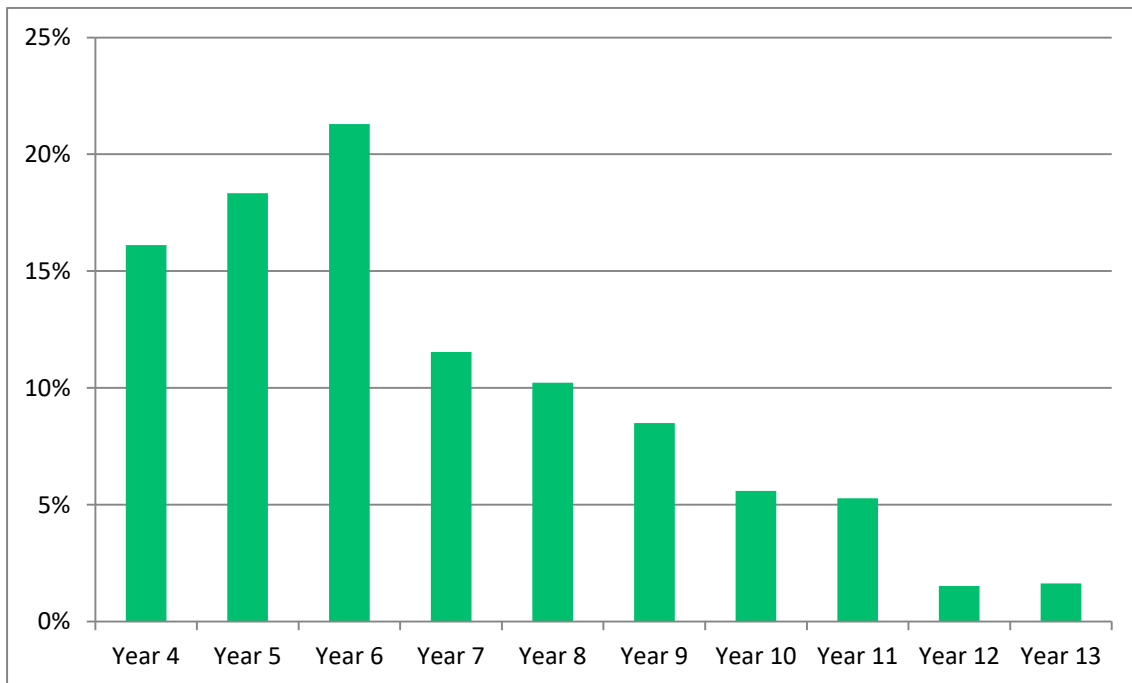


*Figure 1 - What year group are you in?*

In this analysis, we focus upon the relationship between reported screen time and issues related to risk and wellbeing. For some findings we will also draw upon classroom experience with children and young people to reflect upon the findings. However, these anecdotal discussions are more queues for furher discussion, rather than conclusive answers to the matters arising. At present descriptive statistics are used to present simple relationships between screen time and risk/wellbeing. Further analysis in the future will explore the data in more statistical depth to consider complex relationships between data.

# Findings

The primary finding from this analysis is that there is a clearly a link between the amount of time a young person spends online and their exposure to upset, risk, and issues related to wellbeing.

By drawing analysis from a number of different questions, all show differences in response based upon screen time. From figure 2 we can see that there is a variation between the amount of time our respondents spend online. While the largest group say they spend between 1 and 3 hours online in the "average" day, we can see that there is just over 20% that spend between 3 and 6 hours and just over 10% who we might view as "heavy" online users, saying they spend more than 6 hours a day online.

Given the school day is between 6 and 7 hours, we can assume that those heavy users are spending pretty much their whole time outside of the classroom online.
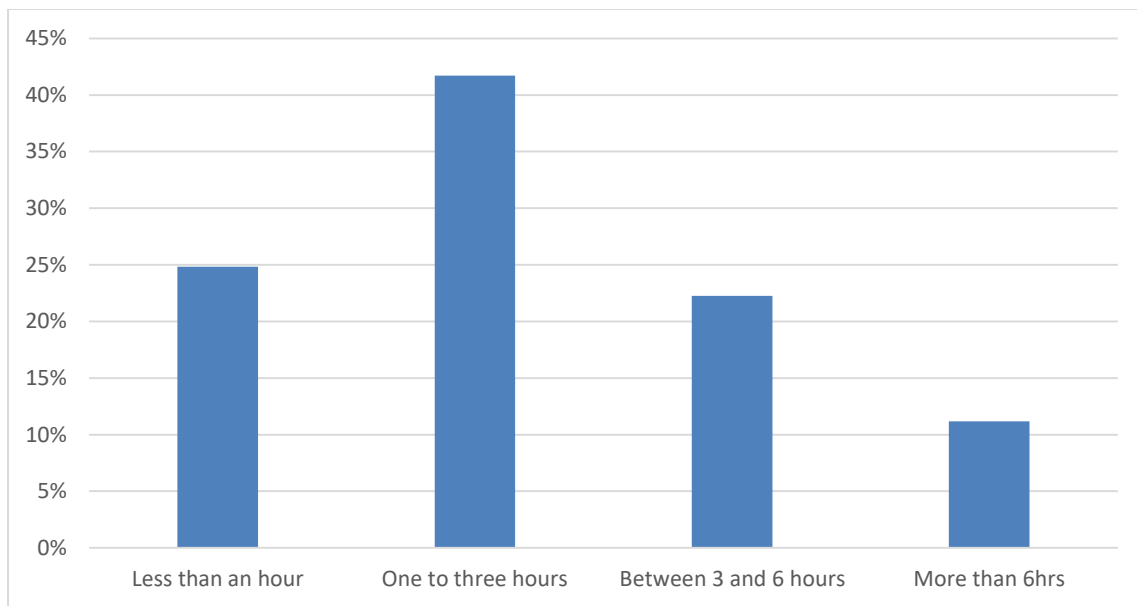


*Figure 2 - How much time do you spend online in an average day?*

There is an interesting gender split between males and females in our responses and while gender is not the focus of this analysis, it is worth noting, as shown in *Figure 3* that boys are more likely to be online for a long time and there is a higher proportion of girls who will engage for less than an hour. For of the 11% of respondents who say they spend more than 6 hours a day online, 57% of those are male. Whereas of the 24% of respondents who say they spend less than an hour online, 60% are female.
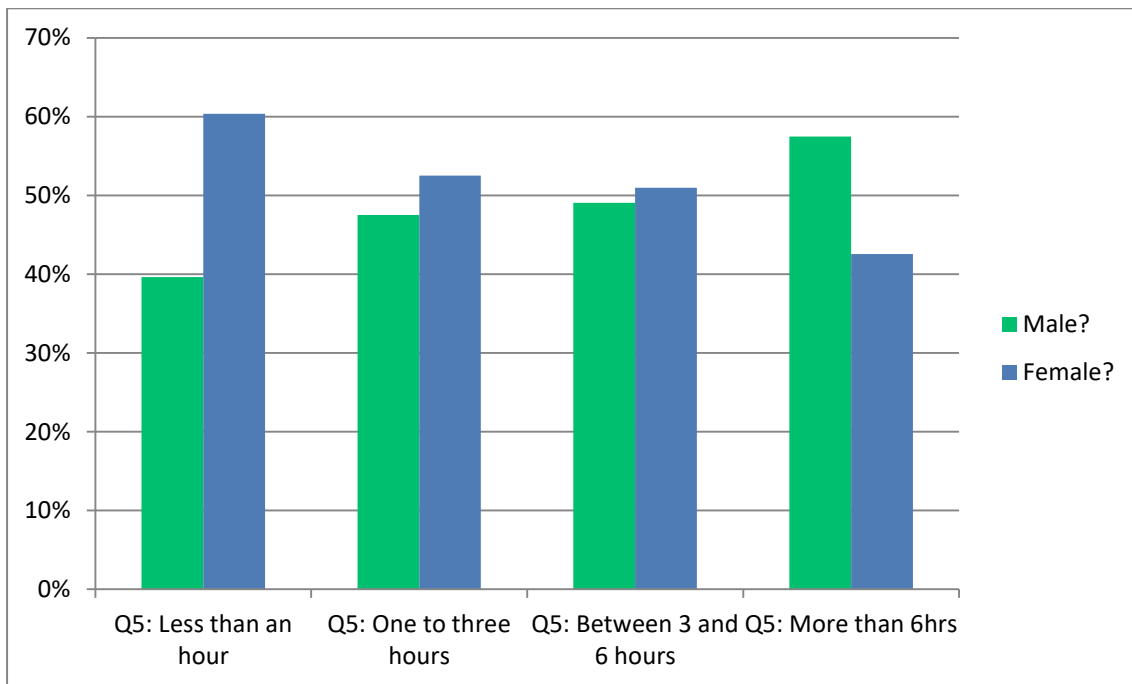
*Figure 3 - How much time do you spend online? Gender differences.*

In *Figure 4* we can see a general increase in online use over time as young people get older. While volume of responses from year 12 and 13 are not high compared to younger year groups, we see unsurprising responses here, with them in general being online for longer as they get older. We have a very steady growth in being online for between 3-6 hours, and a very rapid decline in those spending less than an hour online.

This is unsurprising given the increased use of online technology as young people get older for both school work and also social applications such as listening to music, producing content or engaging with social media.
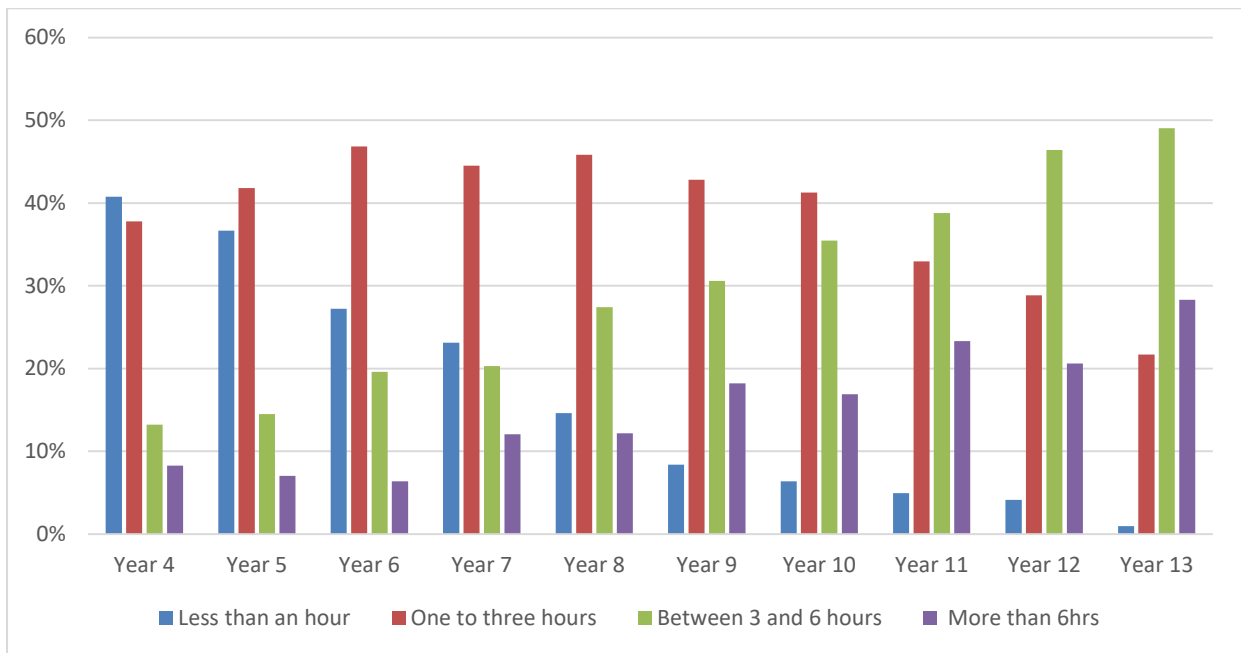
*Figure 4 - What year group are you in/how much time do you spend online?*

In terms of what they do online (figure 5), those who are online for longer are generally more engaged with online services, and there are increases across the board based upon time online. However, there are a couple of types of activities that grow rapidly with longer times online – social networks and messaging. "Browsing/general entertainment" is also an activity that grows quickly (30% for those online for less than an hour, 59% for those more than 6 hours a day online) and "shopping" also more than doubles.

Again, there is nothing particularly surprising by this but it confirms our thoughts that frequent use centres predominantly on social media and messaging. Conversely, we could argue that once children and young people start to use social media and the associated messaging platforms they start to spend more time online.
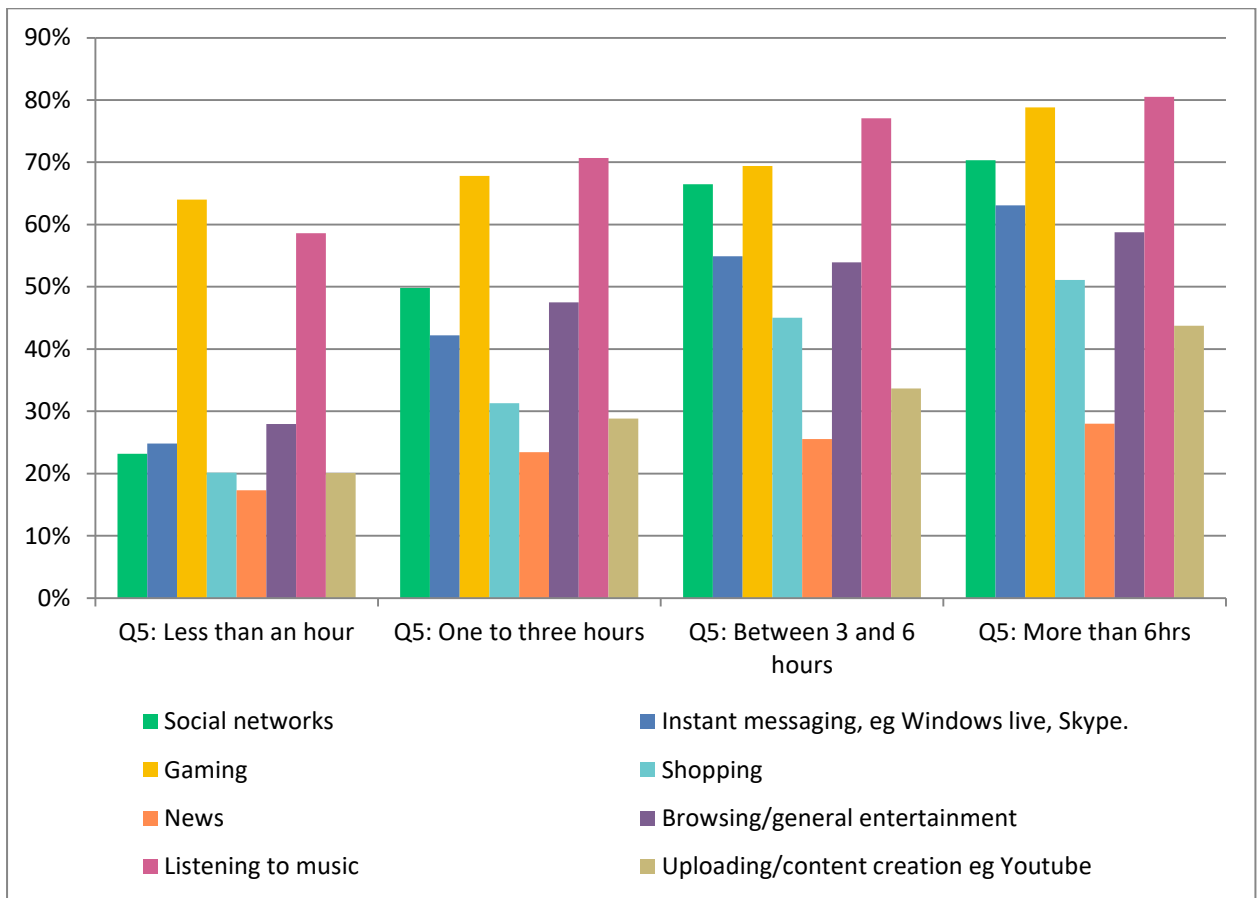
*Figure 5 - What do you use the Internet for?*

One of the questions we pose is "have you ever seen anything that has made you feel upset?". The question is deliberately vague as we do not wish to guide them in what might have caused upset when they have been online. Figure 6 shows that there is a clear correlation between screen time and chance of seeing something upsetting.
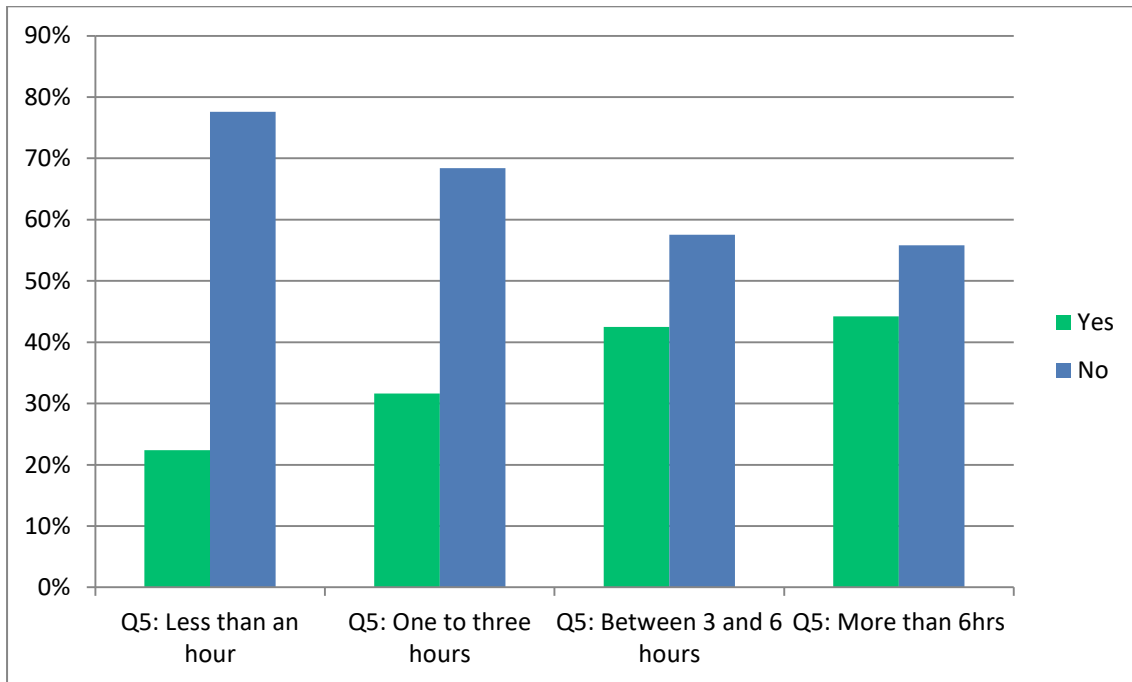
*Figure 6 - Have you ever seen anything on line that has made you feel upset?*

While a more detailed exploration of what sort of content causes upset online will be carried out in a subsequent report, figure 7 is a simple word cloud of the most commonly used terms by our respondents related to what they describe as upsetting content. As can been seen even from this very top level piece of analysis, the sorts of content that cause upset are wider ranging and relate to both behaviours directed toward them (for example, "Friends" is a very common term in the response set) and content they have seen (images and videos involving animals being harmed are also frequently referred to by responders).

*Figure 7 - Commonly used words where young people describe upsetting content*

We also ask whether respondents have been upset by comments or content sent directly to them (compared to content they might have seen), and whether they have said anything abusive to someone themselves. These responses, compared to screen time, are shown in figures 8 and 9. Once again we see a clear increase in the number of respondents who have both received, and sent, nasty comments the longer they spend online.
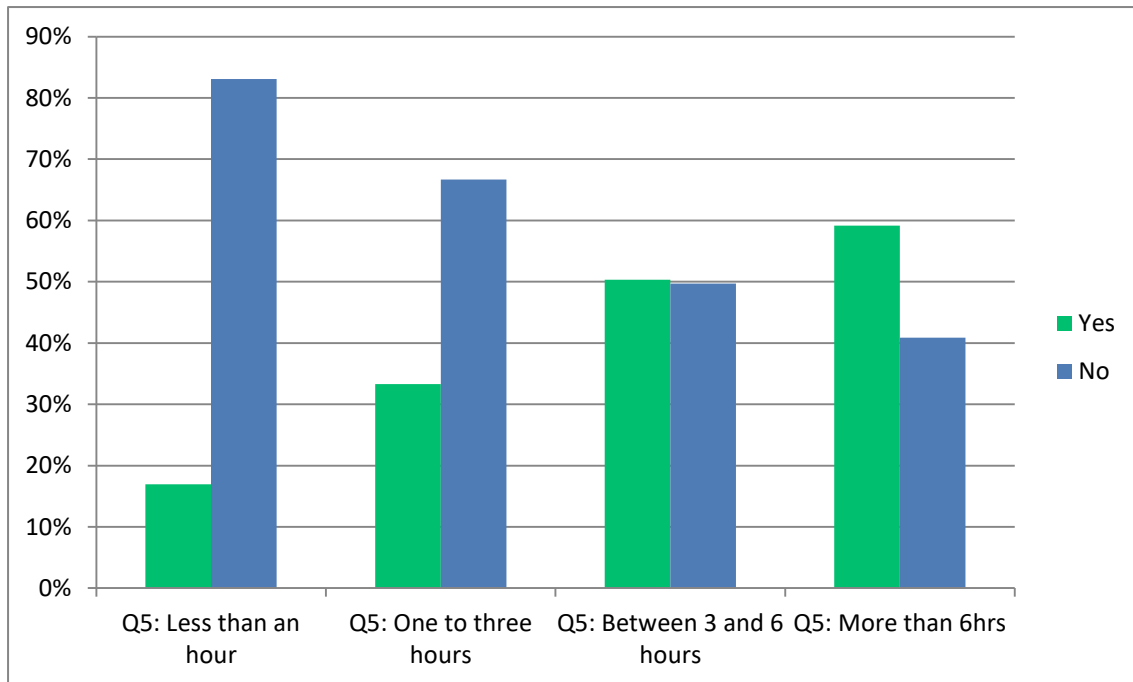


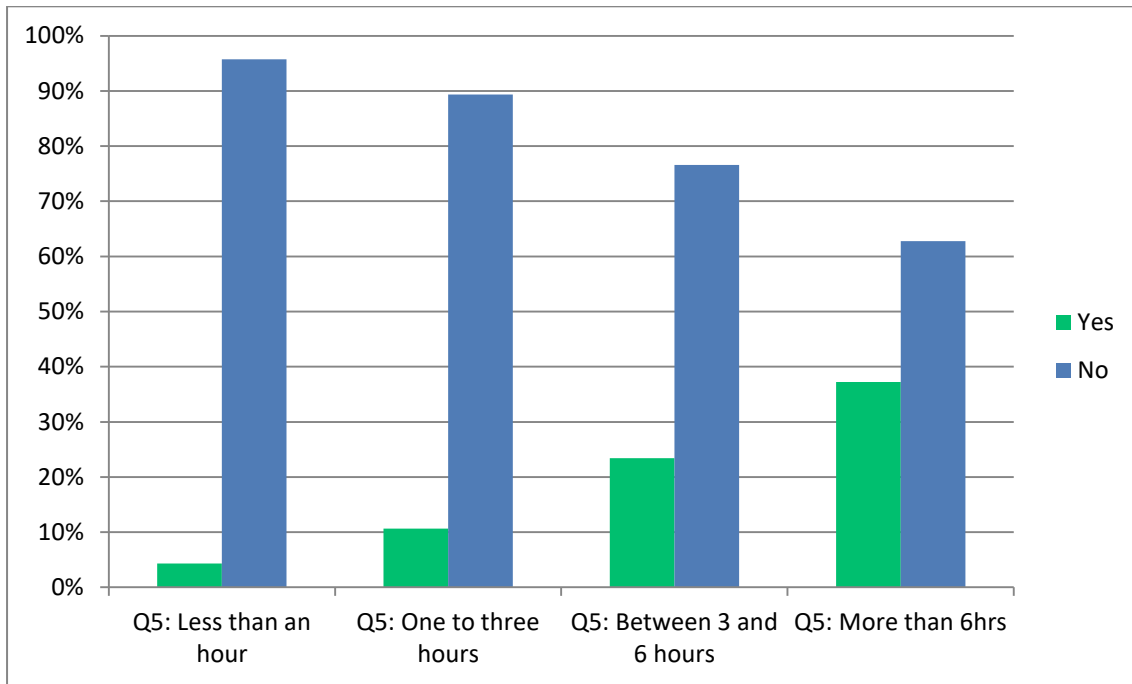*Figure 8 - Have you ever received nasty comments/content online?*

*Figure 9 - Have you ever said anything nasty to someone on line?*

The disparity in proportions between the two figures is of interest and worthy of further exploration. While we can see that the more screen time reported from a respondent, the more likely they are to have been sent something upsetting, and posted something upsetting to someone else, even for heavy users the likelihood of receiving abuse (almost 60%) is over 50% more than sending something abusive (less than 40%). If respondents are being honest (and given the anonymous nature of the survey, and the consistency of responses as the response rate has grown we've little evidence to suggest anything to the contrary) we can clearly show that any child is more likely to receive abusive comments than to send them, suggesting abusers have a broad reach.

# Wellbeing

In the final piece of analysis we present a number of attitudinal statements we have tested against screen time. These are the most directly "wellbeing" related questions we pose in the survey and present interesting insight into the attitudes of respondents toward online wellbeing issues which potentially have far reaching repercussions.

The first statement we ask for their reflections on is whether they think they spend too much time online. This is presented in figure 10.

While there is little surprise that those who spend a lot of time online are more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement "I think I spend too much time online", it is perhaps more interesting to see that even for those with very low online activity (less than an hour a day) some believe they spend too much time online.

Over 20% of respondents who spend less than an hour a day online believe they are online too much. This is something that has been explored in classroom situations with children and young people and many who do feel they spend too much time online, even though they do online very little, say that they are told they spend too much time online, either by a parent or a teacher.
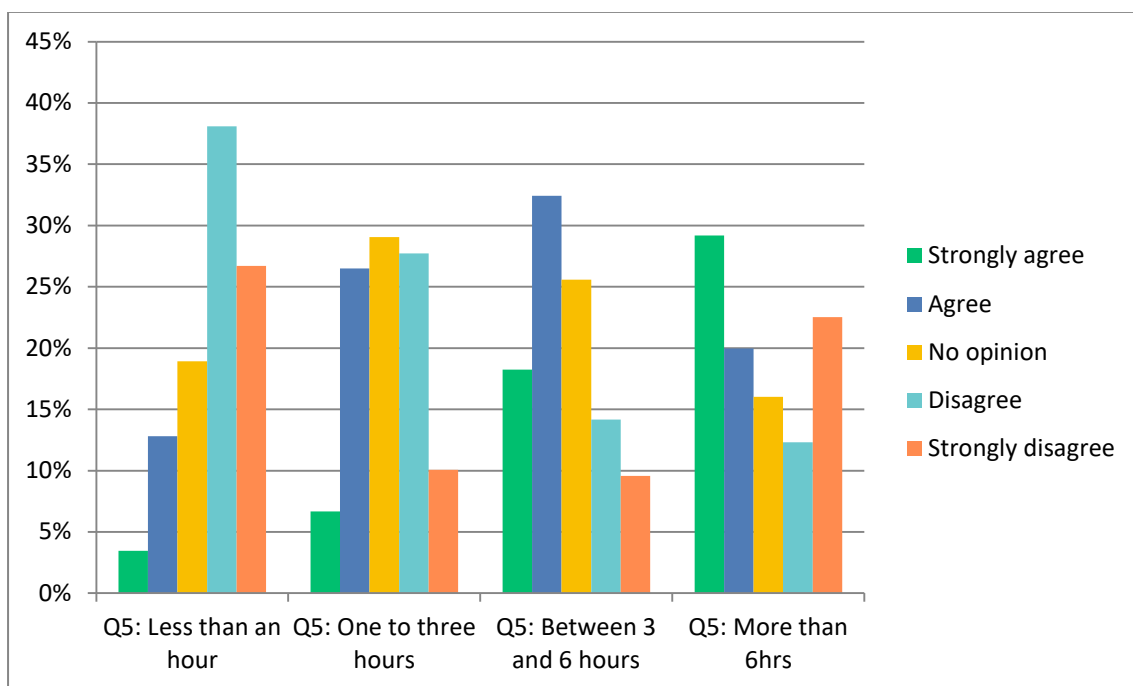


*Figure 10 - I think I spend too much time online*

Another interesting question that falls from this figure is, if there are a large number of respondents who do think they spend too much time online, why don't they do something about it? Again, through classroom discussions, many young people tell us that "fear of missing out" is one of the main reasons they will spend "too much" time online – no one wants to be the first one to end the group communication, social media post or game. However, as we can see from figure 12, loneliness or boredom might also have a role to play

In figure 11, we present responses regarding whether what has been seen online results in longer term concern for our respondents. Presented another way, it is a measure of resilience. We know, from previous questions, that young people are increasingly likely to

have seen something upsetting, but we do not reflect upon whether there is any long term impact from being exposed to such content.
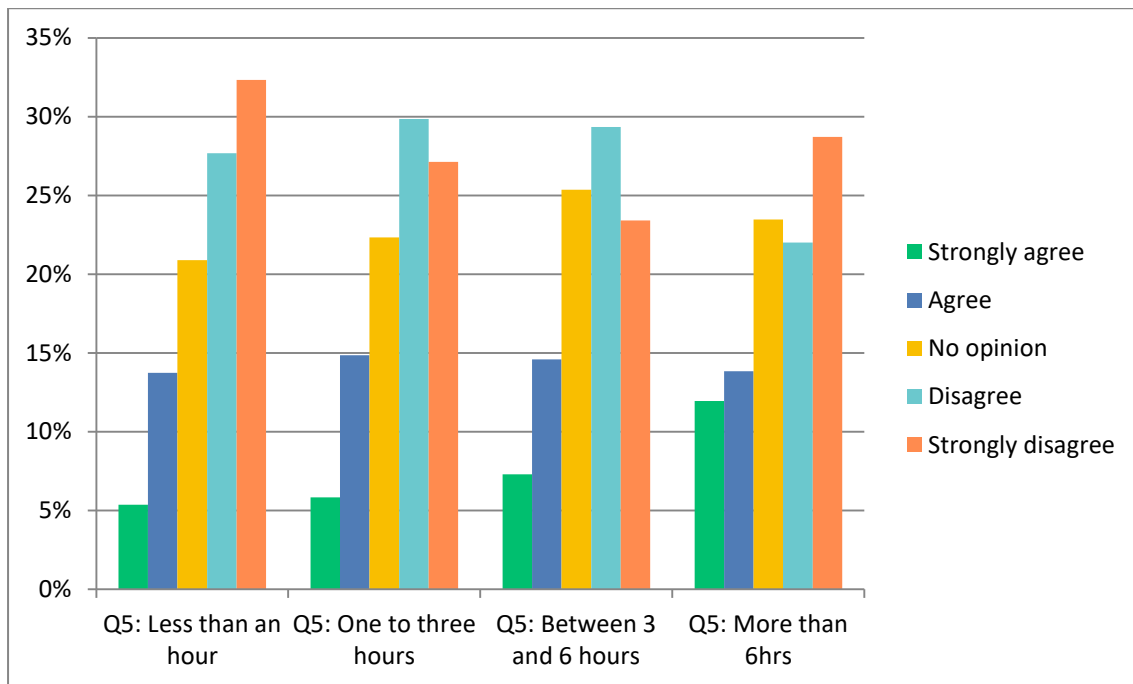


*Figure 11 - I worry about things I have seen online*

We can see that, on face value, there is a minority, but an increasing one, of respondents who say they do worry about what they see online. While the proportion of respondents who "agree" with that statement is fairly static, those who "strongly agree" increases. However, we also need to bear in mind the number of respondents who have stated they have seen upsetting content in figure 6. If we compare these figures in table 1:

| Screen time | See Upsetting Content | Worry about what they've seen |
|---|---|---|
| < 1 hour | 22% | 18% |
| 1-3 hours | 32% | 21% |
| 3 – 6 hours | 42% | 22% |
| > 6 hours | 44% | 36% |

*Table 1 - Comparison on screen time, seeing upsetting content, and worrying about it*

We can see that there are greater numbers who have seen upsetting content that are worried about it, reflecting a level of resilience in some of the population.

Finally, we come to the relationship between loneliness and screen time. From figure 12 we can see a sharp increase in those who "strongly agree" with the statement "I go online because I am lonely". Again perhaps not too surprising but equally it is a sad reflection upon childhood to see so many young people going online because of loneliness.

Even for less frequent online users there is still a significant minority that agree with this statement (over 30% of those who are online between 1 and 3 hours a day). This might also go some way to seeing the large increase in "browsing" expressed in figure 5 (28% of infrequent users compared to 59% of heavy users) – they're online doing "anything" because they have got nothing else to do.
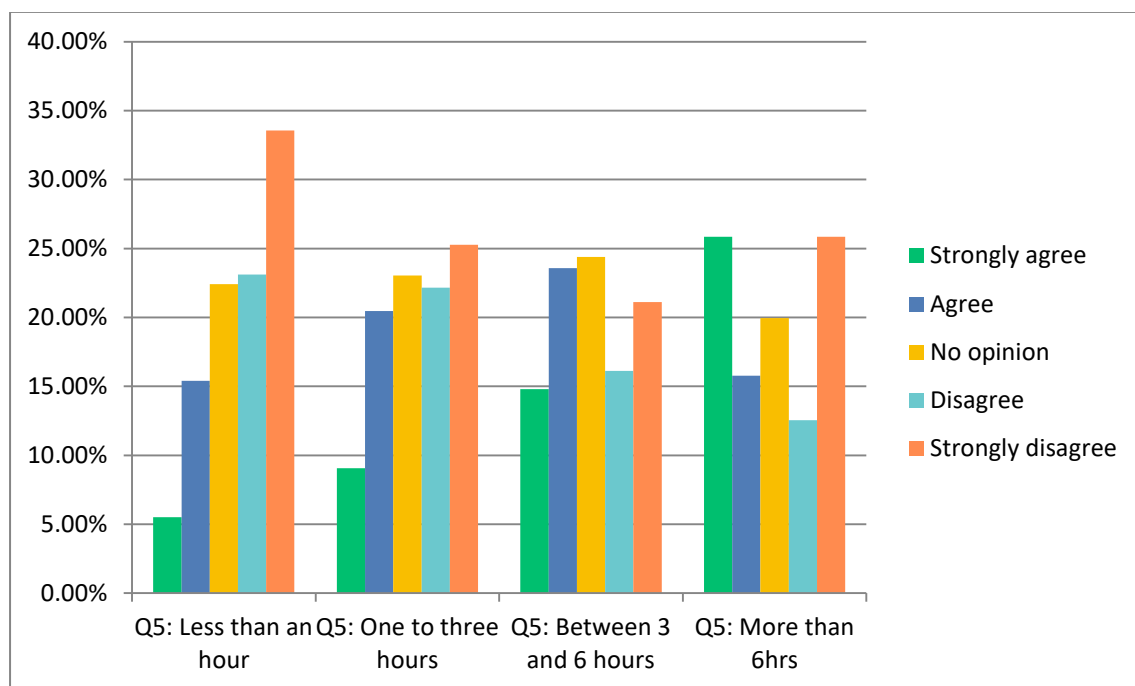


*Figure 12 - I go online when I am lonely*

However, if we consider the very heavy users (more than 6 hours) as many "strongly disagree" with the statement as "strongly agree", there are some users who are finding plenty to do for 6 hours a day online. This is something of interest that will be explored in more detail in subsequent reports. For example, we know from the dataset that those who game are more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with this statement.

# Conclusions and Implications

From this analysis, we can see a number of clear trends among those who spend a lot of time online:

- The older young people get the more time they spend online
- Males are more likely than females to be heavy online users
- Those who spend a lot of time online are more likely to see upsetting content, receive abusive comments, or send abuse to others
- Heavy online users are more likely to worry about how much time they spend online, and worry about what they have seen
- Heavy users are more likely to go online because they are lonely

We do also have a number of questions raised from this analysis that will be explored in more detail in subsequent analyses, such as:

- Are heavy online users more resilient?
- Do specific types of online activity have less impact on wellbeing than others (e.g. gamers are less likely to be lonely)?
- Why do some who spend little time online still worry about the duration of their online activities?
- Does resilience also increase with age?
- What are the gender differences in terms of worry, loneliness and resilience?

However, what is clear from this top level analysis is that screen time does have an impact upon the wellbeing of children and young people.