



Demystifying Youth-Engaged Research

Practical Insights and Lessons
Learned from Two Case Studies



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Hopelab is a transformative social innovation lab and impact investor working to support the mental well-being of adolescents ages 10-25, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and LGBTQ+ young people. Through philanthropic funding, collaborations, and intergenerational partnerships, Hopelab works at the intersection of tech and mental health to help build a thriving future for underserved young people.

Center for Digital Thriving (CDT) is a research and innovation center at Harvard Graduate School of Education. CDT is proudly based at Project Zero, which has a long history as a home to research that leans into areas even where there is little or perceivably zero communicable knowledge or consensus. CDT's mission is to create knowledge and research-based resources that help young people thrive in a tech-filled world.

The Case for Youth-Engaged Research

It's essential to involve young people in research about the issues impacting their lives.



While there is burgeoning interest in conducting youth-engaged research, unique ethical, logistical, budgetary, and timeline considerations can pose a high barrier to entry, particularly for researchers new to this model of work (Hawke et al., 2018). The case studies presented in this article and their companion playbook are written for researchers who value the perspectives of young people but wonder whether they have the knowledge, capacity, and skills to involve them in a meaningful and supportive way. These case studies illustrate that youth-engaged research is not just possible; it is incredibly rewarding, and with the right support systems, those new to this way of working can meaningfully include young people as research collaborators. They describe how two research teams realized the power of collaborating with young people at strategic points in the research process and came away with insights that would not have emerged without the critical input of their youth collaborators.

Key logistical and ethical practices when conducting youth-engaged research:

- + Develop a strategic approach that aligns with the research team's objectives, capacity, resources, and experience with youth engagement.^a
- + Have a flexible timeline to account for scheduling and other logistics to help ensure thoughtful integration of youth input into the research process.^b
- + Clearly communicate what the research process will be like in youth-friendly language.^b
- + Maintain appropriate levels of youth privacy and autonomy, especially around sensitive topics like gender and sexual identity.
- + Plan and coordinate the process from end-to-end, including obtaining IRB approval when necessary, consent, and appropriately compensating young people for their time.
- + Be mindful of pre-existing biases, such as adultist perspectives that devalue youth expertise.^b
- + When feasible, follow up with youth participants so that they know how their voice impacted the research.

Sources: ^aSuleiman et al., n.d.; ^bHawke et al., 2018

For more details about key logistical and ethical considerations, please see our [Youth Voice Playbook](#).

The benefits of involving young people in research – both to the research and to young people themselves – are numerous and well-documented.

Engaging with young people can offer researchers the opportunity to:

- + Better understand youth perspectives and priorities.^a
- + Learn from young people about their lived experiences, especially around sensitive topics such as violence, mental health, bullying, and sexual and reproductive health.^b
- + Improve research quality, relevance, and validity.^a
- + Deepen insights into research findings by offering context and a nuanced understanding.^c
- + More effectively translate research into policies, programs, and services that address youth needs.^a
- + Gain feedback on disseminating and communicating findings to youth and other key audiences.
- + Build skills around partnering and sharing decision-making with young people.^a
- + Discover new research ideas and directions.^a

Sources: ^aSuleiman et al., n.d.; ^bOzer et al., 2022; ^cWeinstein & James, 2022

Engaging in research can offer young people the opportunity to:

- + Build new skills.^a
- + Strengthen communication skills with peers and adults.^a
- + Engage socially with peers and adults.^b
- + Express and assert their voices on the issues impacting their lives.^a
- + Discover that their perspectives are valued and impactful.^a
- + Experience a sense of empowerment.^b
- + Cultivate a positive sense of identity, purpose, and belonging around their involvement and contributions.^a
- + Support the development of programs, policies, and research that can positively influence their lives.^a

Sources: ^aSuleiman et al., n.d.; ^bHawke et al., 2018



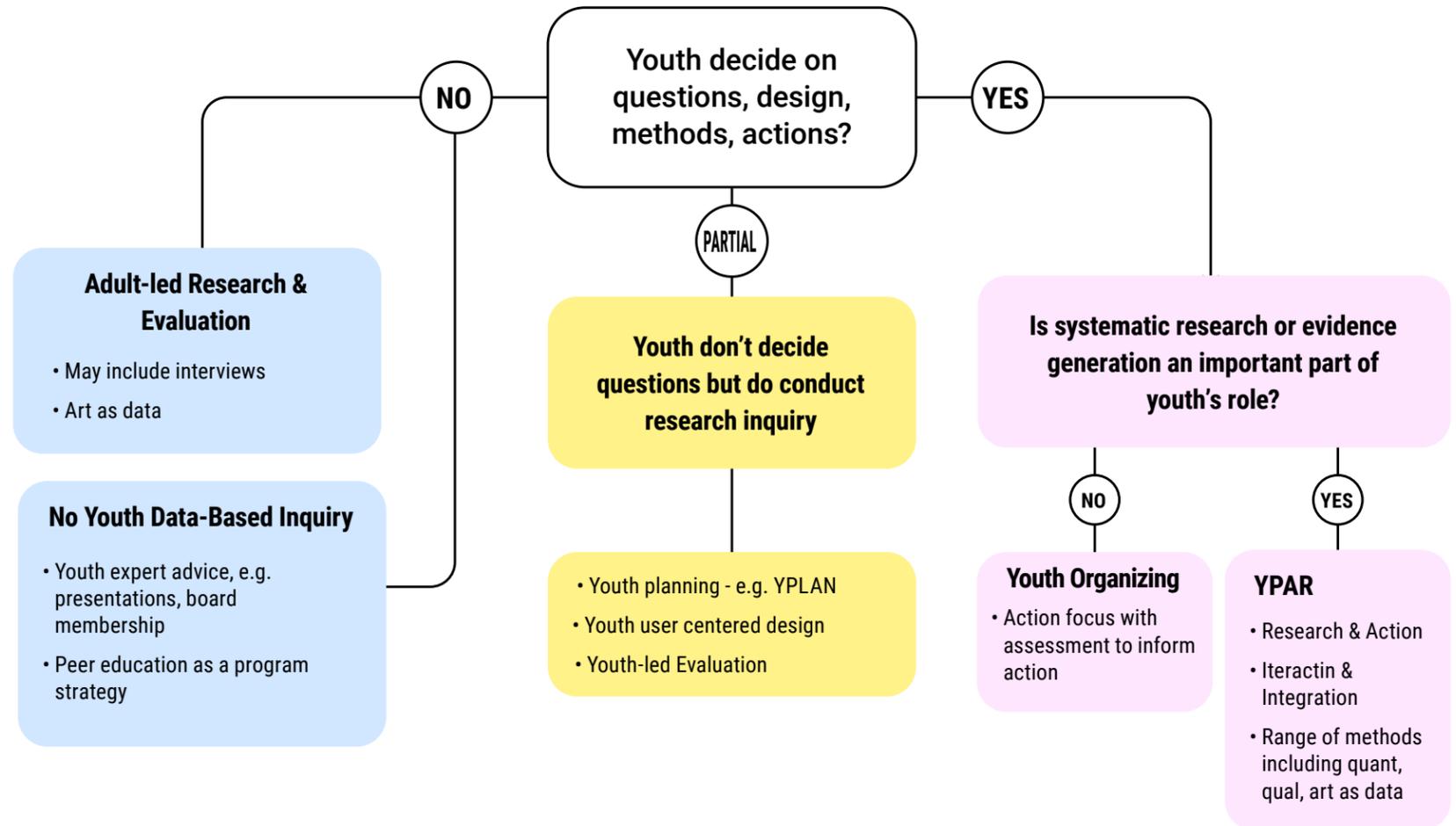
There is no one-size-fits-all approach to engaging young people in research.

Rather, there are various approaches to take depending on the research team’s aims, timeline, expertise, and capacity, including youth participatory action research (YPAR)¹, youth-led planning, youth advisory boards, and youth-informed research² (Ozer et al., 2020). While distinct, these strategies share the aim of involving young people in research, evaluation, or program and policy development through intentional, inclusive, and mutually beneficial interactions that leverage and amplify young people’s experiences, knowledge, and perspectives (Falkenburger et al., 2021; Youth.gov, n.d.).

Although there are numerous ways to involve young people in research, many existing guides and case studies focus on approaches that tend to be fairly time- and resource-intensive, like YPAR, which may only be feasible or appropriate for some research contexts. The two distinct but complementary case studies in this article aim to offer real-world examples of lighter-touch yet effective methods for collaborating with young people across various phases of research. They also highlight the value of partnering with researchers and organizations experienced in youth-engaged research, as well

as the opportunities afforded by collaborating with young people online (i.e., remotely). The first case, from Hopelab, a private foundation, demonstrates how youth voice can be integrated into an existing research agenda where it was previously absent. The second case, from the Center for Digital Thriving, an academic research center, illustrates how youth voice can help catalyze new directions for a research agenda.

Image source: Ozer et al. (2020). Youth participatory approaches and health equity: Conceptualization and integrative review. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 66(3-4), 267-278.



¹Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is an innovative approach to research and social change that engages young people as co-researchers to identify problems relevant to their lives, conduct research on those problems, and then advocate for social action and change (Ozer & Piatt, 2017).

²Youth-informed research is an approach where adult researchers lead the initiative while also engaging and collaborating with young people to gain their feedback and perspectives throughout the process (Hawke et al., 2018). Like all youth engagement work, youth-informed research can vary significantly based on the research setting, objectives, and resources, as well as the age, background, and level of interest, availability, and skills of the youth involved (Hawke et al., 2018).

Featured Cases: Engaging Young People in Research on Technology Use & Well-being

The two featured case studies highlight how youth voices shifted the course of distinct research initiatives examining the complex relationship between youth mental health and digital technology use. Over the last decade and particularly since the COVID-19 lockdowns, advances in digital technology — such as the expansion of remote schooling, the emergence of new social media platforms like TikTok, and the growth of generative AI — have transformed how young people connect, communicate, work, learn, and behave and fueled rising concern about the impact of technology on youth mental health. Much research has been conducted to investigate this topic, and some studies involve young people’s perspectives in a variety of ways (Bickham et al., 2022; Coe et al., n.d.; Mizuko et al., 2020).

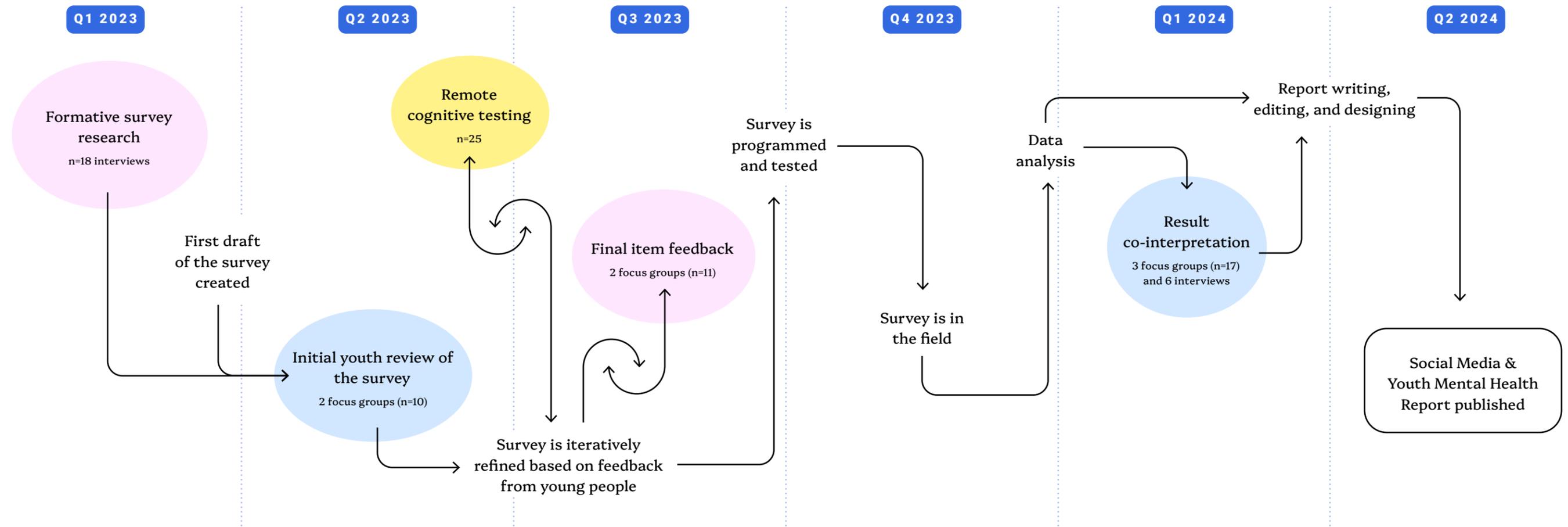


However, despite the benefits it affords, direct collaboration with young people is not yet a norm in the field. Without meaningful input from young people, adult researchers risk overlooking the nuances of young people’s online experiences and oversimplifying the complex relationship between technology and their well-being. Partnering with young people is necessary for producing high-quality, accurate, and relevant research that can effectively inform public health guidelines, school policies, and legislative and regulatory approaches related to technology. Although these two featured cases focus on digital technology use, it is equally important to engage young people in research on the many other issues that affect their lives, such as school climate and safety, access to mental health care, and broader hopes and concerns about the future (Hawke et al., 2018).

Case Study 1 – Hopelab: Infusing Youth Voice into an Existing Research Agenda

Hopelab's journey into youth-engaged research began with a commitment to meaningfully integrate young people's perspectives into a project where their voices had been previously absent – the development and interpretation of data from their national survey on digital technology and youth mental health.

Youth-Engaged Research Timeline: National Survey on Digital Technologies and Youth Mental Health



Deciding on Youth Engagement

Hopelab has a long history of collaborating with young people to build products and services that support youth mental health and well-being. Although Hopelab had experience in youth-centered design work (e.g., [imi](#) and [Nod](#)), young people were not deeply involved in developing or distilling their prior two large-scale national survey efforts commissioned by external researchers in 2018 and 2020. Recognizing the nuance and depth youth perspectives bring to research, Hopelab, in collaboration with its research partner, Common Sense Media, sought to address this gap by finding ways to pragmatically and meaningfully incorporate youth input into the third iteration of this survey.



The Initial Challenge: Creating a Youth Engagement Strategy

In crafting the survey development process, Hopelab faced a notable challenge: ensuring that young people could meaningfully shape the direction of the research amidst existing project constraints. These parameters included clearly defined research aims related to technology and mental health, the need for a portion of the survey items to remain unchanged in order to compare data from previous surveys, predefined dates for the release of the report, and the team's goal of amplifying the voices of LGBTQ+, Black, and Latinx young people.

Recognizing the complexity of balancing multiple priorities while also being new to integrating youth voice into survey research, Hopelab consulted Ahna Suleiman, DrPH, MPH, an expert with extensive experience in youth-engaged research. Dr. Suleiman helped the team quickly

assess which youth engagement approach would best suit their needs. For example, they briefly considered YPAR, but it felt misaligned with the project's predetermined goals, timeline, and resources. The team also explored working with existing youth advisory boards. However, those that Hopelab could readily access were not sufficiently representative of LGBTQ+, Black, and Latinx populations.

Ultimately, the research team chose a model that would allow them to strategically engage young people at key points by partnering with two external organizations: Character Lab³ and dscout.⁴ By working with Character Lab's CLIP program, which trained young people to participate in co-designing and engaging with research, Hopelab was able to easily and quickly connect to nearly 200 diverse, high school-aged teens. Given that Hopelab sought to engage young people across a wider age bracket, they also worked with dscout, which offered access to a broad cross-section of young people ages 18-22.

In addition to facilitating access to young people, Character Lab and dscout managed key logistics,

including recruitment, consent, and compensation processes. They also offered technical support to ensure things went smoothly online for both the research team and the young people. Notably, Character Lab also provided young people with valuable research skills training, mentorship, and access to an on-call social worker for additional support as needed. Cultivating partnerships with Character Lab and dscout was crucial — they gave the team access to the underrepresented perspectives of LGBTQ+, Black, and Latinx young people on digital technology and mental health and helped Hopelab lay the foundation for a more inclusive and impactful research initiative.

³ In June 2024, Character Lab officially sunset. The team has since launched an organization, In Tandem, to build on the work started by Character Lab and continues to make it easy for young people to work alongside organizations to shape the future together. Visit in-tandem.org to learn more.

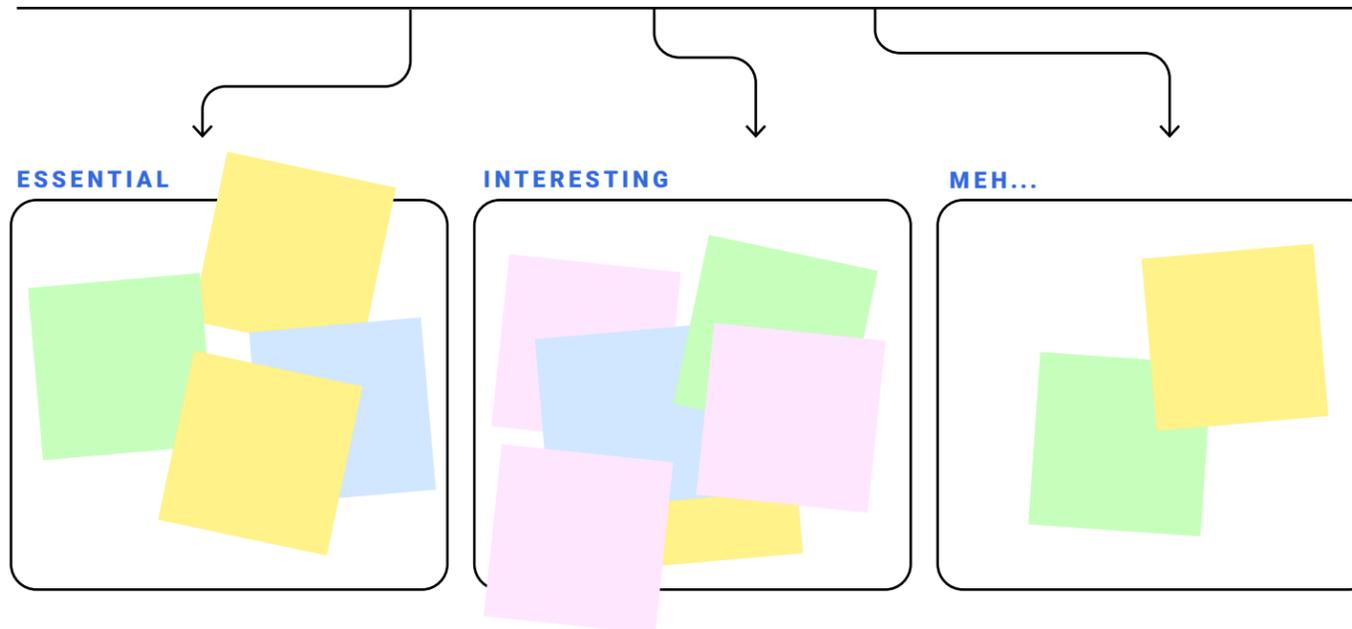
⁴ dscout is a qualitative user research platform for conducting remote, mobile-based and, in-the-moment research.

Survey Topic Card Sorting Activity (Hopelab Formative Interviews)

The First Opportunity: Collaborating with Young People to Develop the Survey

? When it comes to understanding the relationship between teen technology use and mental health, what topics are most important to ask about?

Amount of time young adults spend online	Online Communities	Digital privacy (e.g. digital footprint, ownership, and access to personal data)	Online harassment or bullying (e.g. doxing)	Trust in searching online for reliable info about mental health topics	Write your own...
Artificial Intelligence (e.g. ChatGPT)	Online dating (e.g. dating apps)	The type of online content young adults are consuming	Teletherapy (e.g. Talkspace, Betterhelp) or mental health apps (e.g. Calm)	Virtual reality or augmented reality (e.g. the metaverse)	
The type of online content young adults are creating	Interacting over zoom rather than in person	Use of tech in education	Online activism (e.g. encouraging action on a social, environmental or political issue)	Teletherapy (e.g. Talkspace, Betterhelp) or mental health apps (e.g. Calm)	



With partnerships in place, Hopelab could focus on the survey development process. Hopelab worked with Dr. Suleiman to identify where and when youth input would be most impactful and effective. The first area needing young people’s support quickly emerged: identifying the most important topics to include within the expansive and rapidly evolving field of youth well-being and technology.

To achieve these goals, the research team conducted formative semi-structured online interviews with a sample primarily consisting of youth identifying as LGBTQ+, Black, or Latinx (n=18). To efficiently gather consistent and comparable feedback on potential survey topics, the interviews included an activity where young people sorted topics into three categories based on their perceived importance. This feedback helped the research team identify topics that resonated with young people and filter out those that did not. For example, the Hopelab team initially planned to include questions about augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR) but subsequently decided to remove this topic based on strong feedback from the youth

collaborators that AR/VR had little relevance to their daily lives.

From this initial youth feedback, Hopelab created a rough survey draft that was then shared with young people in focus groups (n=10) to ensure that the questions concisely and accurately reflected young people’s experiences. This input allowed Hopelab to clarify larger questions, such as how to clearly describe generative AI to survey takers and ways to trim the survey by condensing repetitive items.

After incorporating focus group feedback into the survey draft, the final development phases were focused on iteratively testing and refining the survey items. Once Character Lab recruited participants, the research team conducted remote cognitive testing of the entire survey using the Qualtrics platform (n=25) and then concluded with two final focus groups (n=11) to further refine select items. These final, iterative rounds of youth input led to subtle but significant refinements. For example, young people recommended splitting a question about “deleting or taking a temporary break from a social media account” into two distinct actions, as they considered them significantly different in frequency and severity. After incorporating these rounds of input, the survey was finalized and ready for data collection.

The Next Opportunity: Co-interpretation of Survey Findings

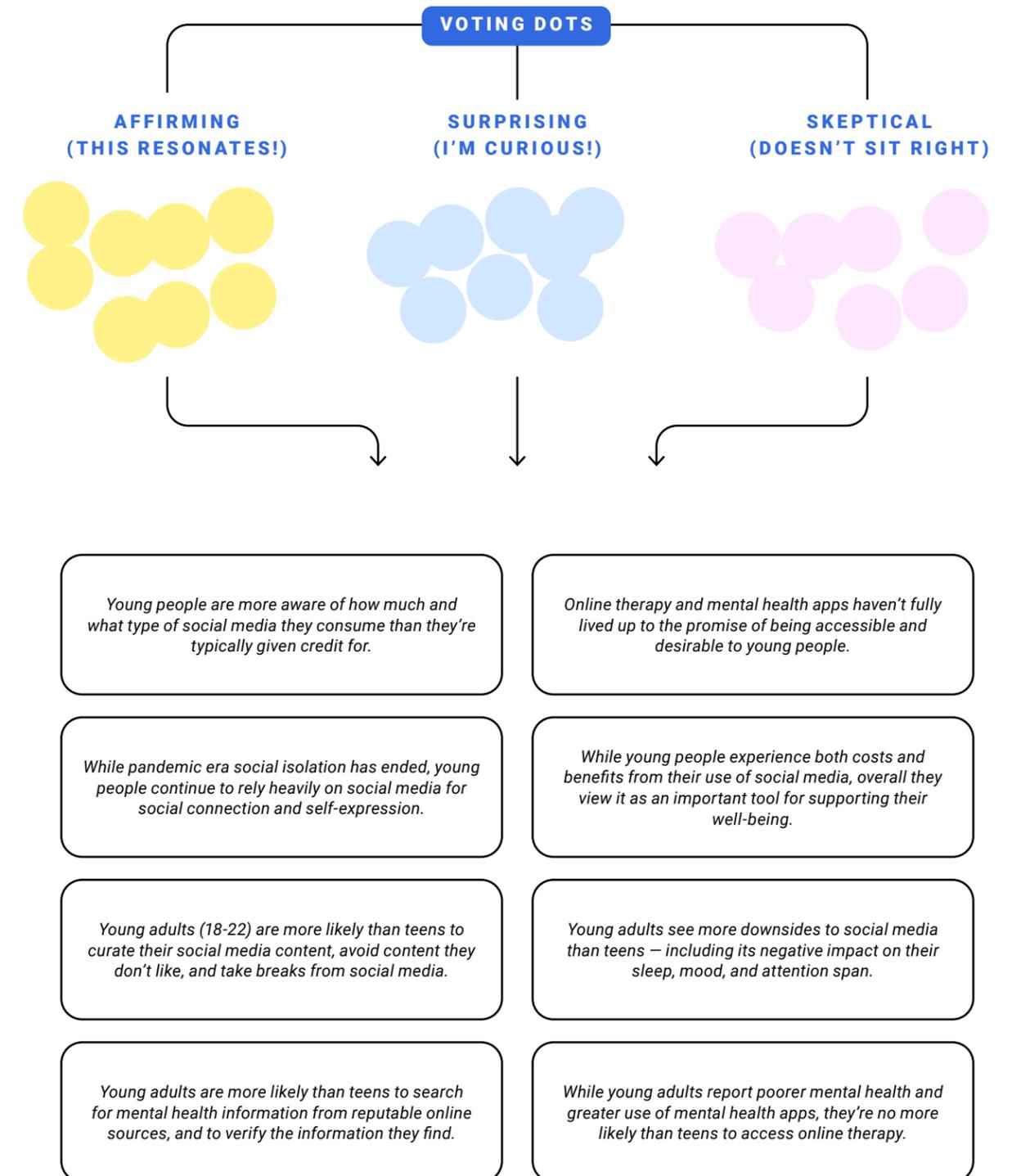
Hopelab fielded the survey to over 1,200 young people, including an oversampling of Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ+ young people. This input generated a wealth of data and presented Hopelab with its next opportunity for youth engagement: determining which findings were most important to highlight, who needed to hear them, and how they should be framed.

Collaborating with Character Lab's CLIP program and dscout, Hopelab involved young people, ages 14-22, in the co-interpretation of the results through three focus groups (n=17) and six interviews. First, the youth collaborators helped evaluate the relative importance and resonance of key findings. The Hopelab team took a creative approach to gather this feedback by designing an activity using simulated newspaper headlines that each offered an interpretation of survey data. For example, young people reacted negatively to the headline, "When it comes to mental health, social media is more helpful than harmful," feeling it was a reductive representation of a complex, context-driven, and individually curated aspect of their lives. They emphasized the importance

of portraying social media in its full complexity, reflecting both its challenges and benefits. These insights deeply influenced the final published report.

Input from young people was critical for many of the harder-to-interpret findings. For example, the survey revealed that Black young people consider social media more important than white young people for obtaining information and support. Yet, Black young people also were more likely to take temporary or permanent breaks from social media. This initially paradoxical result was clarified through conversation with Black focus group participants. They explained how social media is an essential tool for accessing academic, professional, and mental health resources that may be difficult to obtain. On the other hand, they are more likely to encounter racist content on social media and thus may choose to take a break from these platforms to avoid dealing with racism both online and offline. These insights helped contextualize the survey findings and framing of the final report.

Hopelab Results Interpretation Headline Activity





Key Learnings from Hopelab's Youth-Engaged Research

Collaboration with young people throughout the survey development and interpretation process helped Hopelab and Common Sense Media develop a final report that offered a more nuanced and multifaceted depiction of how technology shapes young people's lives compared to previous versions. It also provided valuable insights about how to better collaborate with young people throughout a research effort:

“They [young people] emphasized the importance of portraying social media in its full complexity, reflecting both its challenges and benefits. These insights deeply influenced the final published report.”

1 Meet young people where they are: Through trial and error, the Hopelab team discovered that its expectations for engagement in online focus groups did not always align with youth norms and preferences. For instance, some young people kept their cameras off during Zoom conversations due to technical constraints or differing comfort levels. Others experienced technological challenges by joining from phones instead of laptops, which impacted participation. There was also significant variation in engagement style — some spoke freely, while others were more hesitant or preferred communicating in writing. These initial observations motivated adjustments going forward. For example, during focus group conversations, facilitators actively encouraged different ways of communicating, such as speaking, writing in the chat, reacting with emojis, or adding a “+1” via chat when someone shared a resonant comment. Providing multiple pathways for participation helped cultivate group rapport and allowed for deeper probing into sensitive topics like LGBTQ+ identity.

2 Begin with the impact you want to have: In retrospect, although they were not required to do so, the Hopelab team wished that they had amended their IRB to include the co-interpretation focus groups. This approval would have allowed them to share direct quotes in the published report and convey young

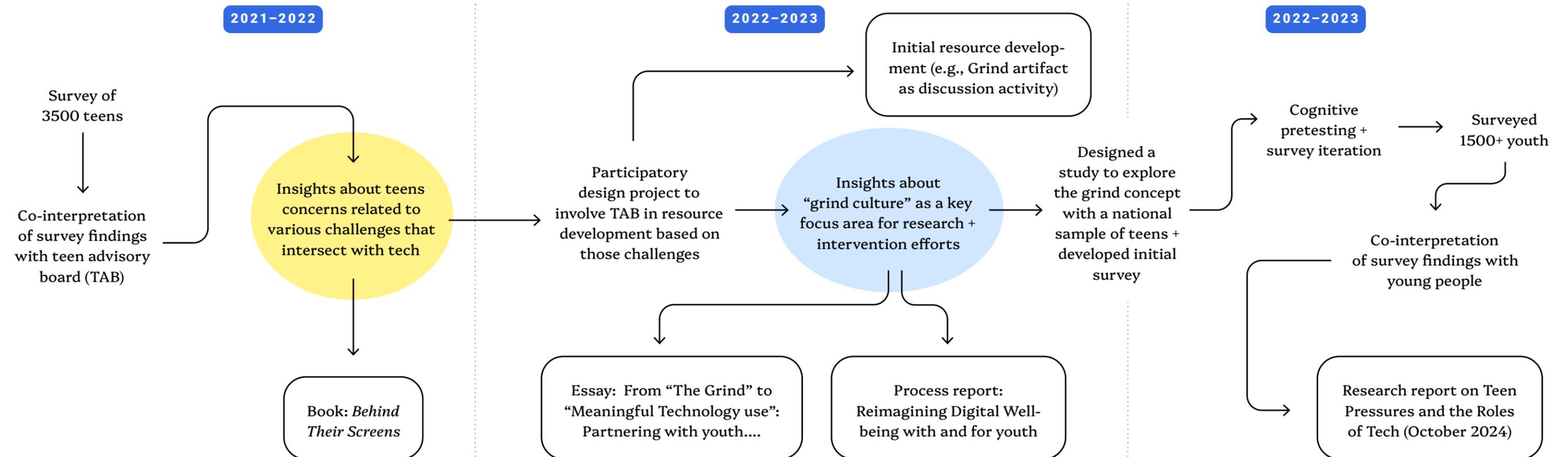
people's perspectives more effectively and powerfully. In the future, the research team plans to revise their processes such that quotes from co-interpretation sessions are IRB-approved as research data.

3 The process matters as much as the product: From the beginning, Hopelab's priority was to carry out a youth engagement effort that impacted its research and served as a positive and meaningful experience for the young people involved. Towards this end, Hopelab collaborated with Dr. Suleiman to evaluate the experience of the youth collaborators. The evaluation, which included six in-depth interviews, revealed the collaboration's highly valued aspects and suggestions for future directions. For example, the youth interviewees emphasized how discussing the survey content motivated them to reflect on their social media use and mental health. They valued the Hopelab team's responsiveness to their feedback and felt their voices made a difference in the final survey draft. They also stressed the importance of regularly updating the survey going forward to reflect the rapidly evolving nature of the topic. These insights underscored the mutual benefits of meaningful youth engagement and provided actionable guidance for future research.

Case Study 2 – Center for Digital Thriving: How Partnership with Youth Inspired & Guided New Research on Youth Well-being and Technology

While the Hopelab case study describes how youth voice can be infused into an existing research agenda, this next case from the Center for Digital Thriving (CDT) illustrates how a meaningful and sustained program of youth input and engagement can catalyze new areas of research and spark the development of new resources. This case study details how the initial involvement of CDT’s Teen Advisory Board (TAB) in co-interpreting survey data resulted in a series of innovative initiatives aimed at supporting digital thriving by better understanding and addressing the complex roles of technology in the lives of young people.

Timeline of Youth Voice Research at CDT



The Starting Point: Creating a Teen Advisory Board for Survey Co-Interpretation

The CDT case study begins with a similar challenge faced by the Hopelab team: how to most effectively and accurately interpret survey data on teens and technology. Like Hopelab, CDT had collaborated with Common Sense Media, collecting data from over 3,500 middle and high-school-aged U.S.-based youth about tech-related pain points like sexting, digital footprints, and the pressures to stay connected.⁵ As the research leads, Emily Weinstein, EdD, and Carrie James, PhD, started to review the data, they wrestled with the concern that their positionality as adult researchers may result in misinterpretation or missed nuance. It became clear that they needed the expertise of young people to help them achieve their initial goal of better understanding young people's experiences and sharing the results. At the time, the team did not know that the decision to engage with young people was the first step on an unanticipated path of innovative research and resource development aimed at supporting teens and their digital well-being.

⁵For further reading, please refer to [Behind Their Screens](#) (Weinstein and James, 2022).

The research team believed that their co-interpretation process would be most effective if it were carried out in a collaborative, discussion-based environment across multiple sessions (rather than in a more individual setting, such as interviews), as they wanted to ensure enough time to thoroughly explore different themes from the data and workshop concepts. Instead of conducting one-off focus groups, as Hopelab had done, they decided on a teen advisory board (TAB) model. This approach fulfilled the desire for sustained collaboration and offered the opportunity to develop rapport and group dynamics to foster a generative participatory process.

CDT's recruitment strategy for their TAB was guided by two goals: 1) recruiting teens with diverse backgrounds, geographies, and perspectives on technology, and 2) ensuring teens had a genuine interest in the project so that it would feel engaging rather than burdensome. Using their existing networks of educators to distribute a recruitment survey, the research team selected a diverse group of twenty-two teens ages 15-19. They worked with teens and their

caregivers to gain consent/assent, and offered Zoom meetings or phone calls with youth and their caregivers to discuss the overall project, any questions, and other key information about the research. The TAB group was divided into pods of 5-6 (based primarily on teens' schedules/availability) to maximize participation and ensure there would be time for each person to contribute as they wished.



New Outputs & Unexpected Research Directions: Digital Well-being & “The Grind”

As the research team mapped out the survey results and the TAB’s feedback, an overarching finding rose to the surface: tech-related challenges for young people were real, but they also varied considerably and co-existed with numerous upsides (Weinstein et al., 2023). For example, the teens discussed pain points around social interactions and the support, positive engagement, and validation that could come from online spaces. Over time, as CDT digested and disseminated teens’ insights about tech experiences, it became increasingly clear that there was a need for interventions that acknowledged the complex roles of technology in young people’s lives. This recognition catalyzed a new project to co-create “with-teens, for-teens” digital resources. Realizing that adults often have assumptions about teens’ experience of technology that result in well-intentioned resources or messaging approaches that miss the mark, CDT started this new initiative with the aim of simply ideating with teens about what would be most helpful to them.

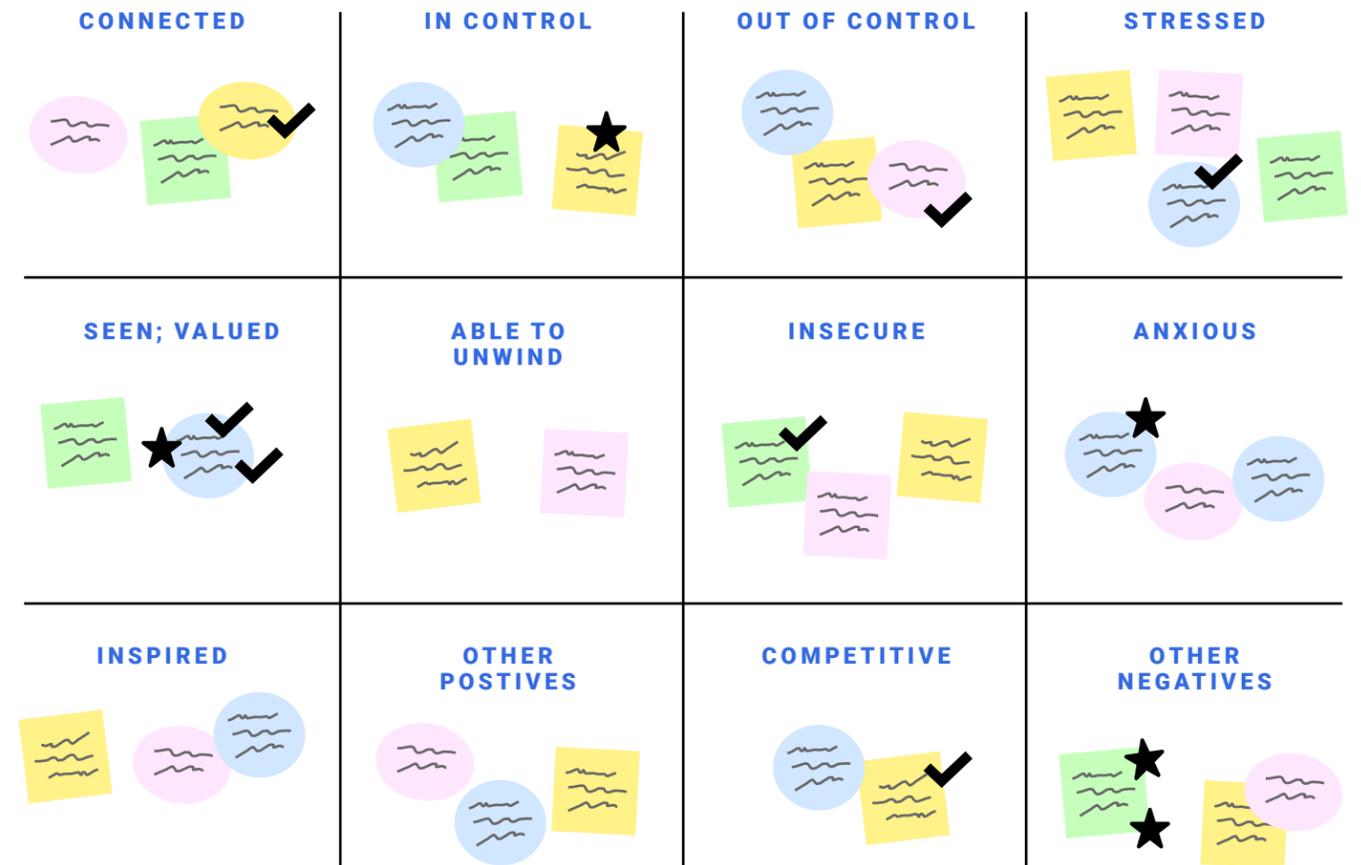
The new project was an ideal opportunity to build upon the already established partnerships and rapport

developed within the TAB. Drs. Katie Davis and Beck Tench both brought participatory design experience and were key partners in helping to structure this part of the project and process. Working with a subset of 6 teens from the original group, the CDT team designed a three-week sprint consisting of six intensive, 1.5-hour Zoom co-design sessions.⁶ Although they had a structured provisional plan for facilitating these sessions, the CDT team was also committed to staying flexible, actively listening, and adjusting the agenda in response to the teens’ interests and input. Ultimately, this ethos of improvisation would end up being a driving factor behind the evolution of CDT’s research agenda during and beyond the sessions.

The first session was focused on exploring young people’s perspectives on technology. The team developed a series of engaging activities to invite input and stimulate conversation. They began with an online Mural board featuring words that reflected the impact of technology on well-being, all of which were derived from previous research (e.g., connected, seen/valued, inspired, in control, stressed, anxious, insecure,

CDT Exploring the Impact of Technology on Teen Well-being

? When you’re using tech, when do you feel the most...



competitive, out of control. The board also included a section where teens could anonymously add more emotions using digital post-its. Reflecting on the results, one teen pinpointed a central theme: “The culture of needing to be productive all the time and, like, needing to be working all the time and, like, the grind”. This concept resonated with

the group, sparking an animated discussion on the harmful effects of “the grind” and its related issues, such as social comparison, influencer culture, distraction, and the role of TikTok. The teens’ strong interest in “the grind” was evident. Although it was not part of the original plan, the research team decided during their post-session debrief and planning for

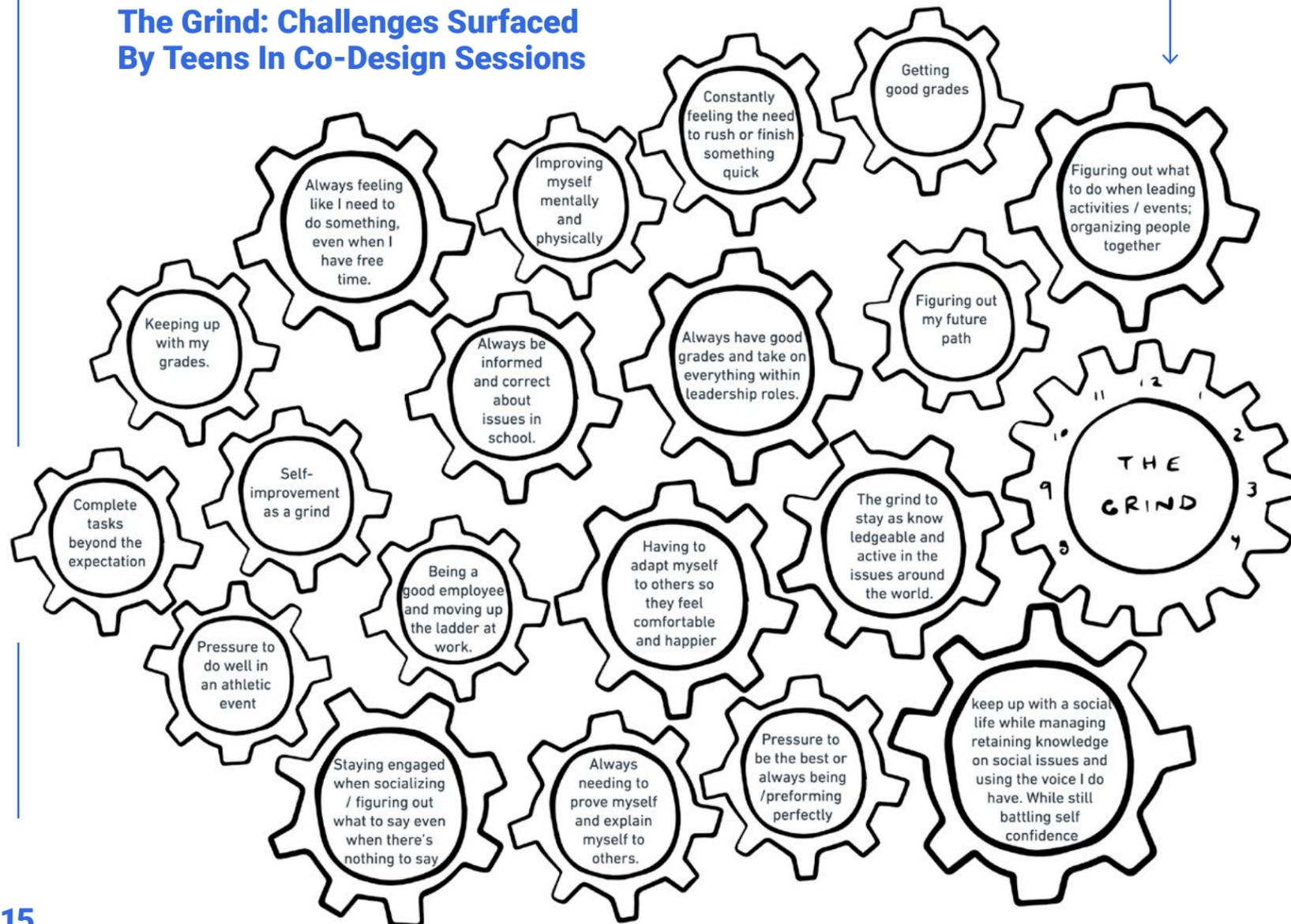
⁶ For a detailed overview of the co-design sessions and activities, please refer to [Reimagining Digital Well-Being With and For Youth: Co-Design Process Report](#) (Center for Digital Thriving, 2022). The digital well-being resources co-developed with the teen design group can be found at: <https://digitalthriving.gse.harvard.edu/resources/>

the subsequent session to embrace the group's energy and integrate "the grind" into the next session.

In preparation for the second session, CDT developed a new activity using Mural that allowed each teen to annotate a visual with blank gears accompanied by the prompt: "What is your grind? In what ways do you hustle or feel like you should hustle?". In subsequent sessions, the team continued to build on insights related to "the grind" and

the broader interest in helping teens learn strategies to support digital well-being and create space, prompts, and opportunities to reflect on their experiences. Ultimately, this decision to explore "the grind" had a powerful ripple effect beyond this six-session sprint, influencing the subsequent design sessions, digital resources, and, eventually, another major research initiative for CDT.

The Grind: Challenges Surfaced By Teens In Co-Design Sessions



Diving Deeper: A New Research Topic and New Youth Insights

Inspired by the teens' insights and reflections, the CDT team decided to dive deeper by collaborating with Common Sense Research and psychologist Sara Konrath to develop a new survey about "the grinds." The co-design work with the TAB directly informed the survey's topics, ranging from social media and mental health to the myriad of pressures teens face. The CDT team also used direct quotes and insights from the TAB when crafting the survey questions about the different pressures that teens face. After drafting the survey, the team and their collaborators worked with a survey group, SSRS, which led a round of cognitive interviewing (n=13). The cognitive interviews were designed to help the researchers understand how teens interpreted the questions, arrived at their answers, and whether any questions were unclear or could be made more relevant.

Teen input shaped the wording and response options for several survey items. For example, in response to a question about different sources of pressure (i.e., people and social media platforms), the teens pointed out that some sources could simultaneously make pressures better

and worse. They suggested adding an option to capture this nuance, leading CDT and their collaborators on the project to include "Mix of both" alongside the original response options ("Makes this pressure worse," "Makes this pressure better," and "Neither better nor worse"). Additionally, the teens helped the research team clarify various definitions within the survey. For example, the teens provided examples of what the phrase "Pressures to achieve the most or to be impressive" meant to them, which the researchers then adapted and incorporated into the survey. After other final refinements based on the youth input, the survey was ready and subsequently administered to over 1,500 U.S.-based teens ages 13-17.

Drawing from their prior survey experience, CDT recognized early on that they would need youth guidance to help interpret the findings. The CDT team sought and received IRB approval to conduct these sessions, record them, and utilize anonymized quotes in publications. Given the scale of their co-interpretation needs and the project's timeline constraints, CDT adopted a youth engagement approach that involved

Survey Topic Reflection Activity

SELF CARE

? Explain how you like to self care, including different practices you incorporate in your routine.

What do you do to care for your well being (self care)?				
What gets in the way of taking care of your well being (self care)?				

BURNOUT

? Tell us what you know about burnout, what are the signs/symptoms, and what you hear from others about burnout (for example, online, at school, or at home)

What do you think of when you hear the term "burnout"? Where did you hear this? online, school, or home				
How do you know you are close to burning out?				

recurring sessions with multiple groups: they conducted three sequential, interactive sessions with four distinct focus groups (n=12 sessions in total) representing teens who identified as girls, boys, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC. After recruiting teens from their existing networks for the girls group and the BIPOC teen group, CDT partnered with Character Lab's CLIP program to ensure they could recruit focused groups with representation from LGBTQ+ youth and teen boys. As they did with Hopelab, Character Lab also provided logistical support with scheduling,

allowing CDT to focus on designing and facilitating the sessions.

The final groups included 19 teens (n=10 recruited by CDT; n=9 recruited by Character Lab). At the start of each meeting, CDT provided activities to jumpstart thinking and frame the coming activities, which proved especially helpful for teens who were more reserved or preferred to contribute through written communication (and could do so on the Whimsical boards). To foster rapport and comfort in the short time available, the focus groups

were facilitated by a CDT staff member with experience working with teens and a trained undergraduate research assistant who was also a teen. During the sessions, the teens shared their perspectives and feedback on the survey topics, questions, and emerging findings using a variety of interactive, emoji- and graphic-based activities.

These thoughtful strategies helped CDT and their collaborators collect rich, nuanced insights into the interpretation and dissemination of the survey data. Currently, the research

team is reviewing transcripts, coding the discussions, and highlighting quotes from the sessions. In October 2024, the research report that meaningfully integrates this input and guidance will be published.

Survey Question Co-Interpretation Activity

? In the survey, we asked: In the past week, how often did you do each of the following?

- Never
- 4+ Days
- 1-3 Days

Spend time outside or in nature?

Have a deep / meaningful conversation with friends?

Get at least an hour of exercise / physical activity?

Get 7 or more hours of sleep at night?

Give help to friends or classmates who needed it?

Do something creative that was not for school?

Do something just for fun or relaxation?

- 1 Use the star emoji, tell us which of these are the **2 most important** for teens' well being.
- 2 Use the rock emoji to tell us which of these is the **2 hardest** to practice.



? Here is how we asked about burnout on the survey: Overall, how would you rate your level of burnout?

Burnout has symptoms such as feeling emotionally exhausted, being cynical or mistrusting of others, and feeling like you're not accomplishing enough.

1	2	3	4	5
<i>I enjoy my life. I have no symptoms of burnout.</i>	<i>Occasionally I am under stress, and I don't always have as much energy as I once did, but I don't feel burned out.</i>	<i>I am definitely burning out and have one or more symptoms of burnout, like physical and emotional exhaustion.</i>	<i>The symptoms of burnout that I'm experiencing won't go away. I think about this a lot.</i>	<i>I feel completely burned out and often wonder if I can go on. I am at the point where I may need some changes or may need to seek some sort of help.</i>

Key Finding Co-Interpretation Activity

? 1. Pick a column, put your initial/pseudonym.
2. Pick an emoji that matches your reaction to the headline.



	A	S	M	O
Girls and non-binary teens reported higher pressures across the board.	😐	😐	😐	😐
LGBTQ+ teens reported higher pressures across the board.	😐	😐	😐	😐
Older teens reported higher pressures related to Game Plan ("the pressure you feel to have a future path all figured out").	😐	😐	😐	😐
Teens with higher family income OR parents with higher education reported more pressure related to Game Plan, Achievement, and Appearance.	🙄	🙄	😐	😐

Key Insights from the Center For Digital Thriving's Youth-Engaged Research



Throughout their process, CDT continued to see the value of actively involving young people in their research through an intentional, creative, and respect-driven approach. Reflecting on their youth-engagement efforts, a few valuable insights emerged:

1 Staying flexible makes a difference: CDT approached their youth-engaged work with an overarching interest in supporting young people's digital agency and well-being yet allowed their research agenda to evolve naturally toward this goal. They paused at each critical decision point, engaged with young people as possible, and let youth knowledge and input inform their decision-making. By remaining flexible yet closely in touch with their core aim, CDT was able to embrace real-time feedback, pivot, and create space to explore entirely new lines of work. This approach led to research on "grind culture," and it also inspired new resources designed with sensitivity to and alignment with young people's lived experiences.

2 Insider knowledge provides context and nuance: Young people have insider knowledge that can play a crucial role in boosting the design, refinement, and validity of study plans. For CDT, getting teen input informed the direction of their research in a broad sense, but also more granular decisions like developing the survey questions.

"It became clear that they [CDT] needed the expertise of young people to help them achieve their initial goal of better understanding young people's experiences and sharing the results."

The latter helped ensure that survey questions, response options, and definitions were clear and reflective of young people's lived experiences; cognitive interviews with teens also helped the team lean into the wisdom of "measure twice, cut down on error" in survey research (Gehlbach & Brinkworth, 2011). Youth input informed adjustments that facilitated more relevance and necessary nuance, such as adding new response options and examples clarifying survey items. Involving youth in the co-interpretation of survey findings on the other side of data collection once again helped re-introduce critical nuance that the researchers included alongside the survey data in their final research report.

3 Working with youth advisors improves the research quality: CDT's youth engagement strategy highlighted the power of listening to and honoring teens' experiences and perspectives with curiosity, respect, and humility. By collaborating with teens in a sustained and meaningful way, CDT also developed a rapport with teens, which contributed to

the quality of insights that surfaced across the different project phases. Ultimately, these relationships helped the team recognize that many adult assumptions about what is most helpful for teens (including CDT's own!) can miss the mark. Making teens' experiences more visible helped unlock new directions for research, and working alongside teens facilitated impactful steps forward in creating responsive, timely resources. Teens helped the researchers see that adults frequently approach youth tech use with a "referee" mindset, imposing strict rules and controls, rather than adopting the role of a "coach" who fosters agency, self-awareness, growth, and problem-solving support around "hard plays" and digital dilemmas. This led to additional work streams beyond the current case, like new professional development support for teachers to embrace the pivot from referee to coach. Elevating teens' perspectives in safe, sustained, and respectful environments allowed CDT to drive their work forward from a youth-informed perspective.

Three Key Strategies for Conducting Online Youth-Engaged Research:

1 Invest time in cultivating rapport and setting norms from the start.

Establishing a foundation of comfort and trust was essential for fostering an open, safe, and engaging environment throughout each process. CDT and Hopelab used simple strategies to navigate this important phase, such as rapport-building and icebreaker activities that helped the young people involved feel more familiar with one another, the adult researchers, and the online collaboration tools (e.g., Mural). Both teams learned that setting clear expectations for online collaboration was essential, especially on platforms like Zoom, where typical social cues can be harder to recognize and communication preferences, styles, and levels of comfort can vary quite a bit.

3 Embrace the logistical and strategic value of partnership.

Adult-youth research collaboration can be logistically complex. Partnering with Character Lab, which had the capacity and resources to recruit young people and manage logistics like IRB, consent, and compensation, made a significant difference for both research teams. For Hopelab, this partnership enabled the research team to remain flexible and responsive within their timeline constraints. It also connected them to young people with some research training and familiarity with adult researchers, which added efficiency and ease. For both teams, this collaboration facilitated intentional recruitment toward the goal of amplifying the voices of youth from different identity groups, helped the teams effectively integrate youth input at key points in the research timeline, and enhanced the overall feasibility of their youth engaged-research efforts.

2 Provide diverse and engaging pathways to participate.

Communication skills and preferences develop considerably throughout adolescence, not only between individuals of similar ages and backgrounds but also across different contexts and discussion topics. CDT and Hopelab designed various pathways that accommodated this variation by allowing young people to engage verbally, nonverbally, synchronously, and asynchronously. Offering multiple methods provided the dual benefits of increasing engagement and enriching the research. For example, Hopelab found that feedback from focus groups about survey topics aligned with input from their asynchronous, nonverbal “card sorting” activity. This triangulation of information strengthened the research team’s confidence in the survey’s validity and made it easier to communicate their decision-making processes with other project stakeholders.

Conclusion

For Hopelab and CDT, intentionally engaging young people in research brought key insights, perspectives, and new questions that would not have otherwise emerged. These cases demonstrate the value and feasibility of youth-engaged research, especially when done in partnership with organizations that reduce common logistical, capacity, and resource-related challenges. They also remind us that effective youth engagement requires an openness to having adult ideas challenged and a genuine embrace of the expert knowledge that young people hold. Through their efforts, both Hopelab and CDT were able to simultaneously enhance their work while also offering young people genuine opportunities to shape research on core issues impacting their lives. The hope with this report is that it encourages others to consider how their research, knowledge, and perspectives can be enriched by creating space for, listening to, and learning from young people today, and that these examples offer inspiration of how to make it possible.

Additional Resources

Below, we offer some additional resources should you want to learn more about engaging young people in research or the research described in these case studies.

Youth Voice Playbook

The Youth Voice Playbook is a free resource collaboratively produced by Hopelab, Character Lab, In Tandem, and the Center for Digital Thriving. We created it because we want to help build a future where all young people can thrive – and to make that happen, we know young people’s voices need to be heard, their experiences understood, and their ideas elevated. We also know that a lot of people who share this core belief aren’t sure where to start or how to meaningfully build youth voice into their work.

- [In Tandem’s Youth Codesign Recruitment Services](#)

Hopelab Research

- [2024 National Survey](#)

CDT Research and Resources

- [Youth Co-Design Process Toolkit](#)

Other Resources to Support Youth Engagement Efforts

- A general guide to [Youth Engagement in Research and Evaluation](#) (UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent)
- Learn more about the [Core Science of Adolescent Development](#) (UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent)
- YPAR-specific resources: [UC Berkeley’s YPAR Hub](#) and [Leveraging Best Practices to Design Your Youth Participatory Action Research \(YPAR\) Project](#)

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