

APPS THROUGH THE AGES

Young **Gen Z** and
Alpha's experience of
a connected world



ABOUT THIS REPORT

Are smartphones failing our children? How young is too young for social media?

Our children are digital natives, but they are not digital experts. In the fast-paced world of technology, where AI, social media, and digital tools evolve at lightspeed, **concerned parents, lawmakers, and governments around the world are coming together against a collective enemy:** the smartphone.

Anxiety, depression, and self-harm rates [are soaring](#). Data privacy, online fraud, and predators are just some of the risks children come up against as they navigate the digital world. **With children's wellbeing at stake, the worry is understandable.** Initiatives such as [36 Months](#), a teen wellbeing movement with the goal of raising the minimum age for social media, are fast gaining traction among concerned families. Two thirds of Australian voters now support [raising the social media limit to 16](#), but **are restrictions like this the solution?**

Today's **tech-savvy kids will easily vault their way over restrictions and social media bans:** much like skipping class to smoke at the playground instead, Gen Z and Alpha come armed with their own rule-bending tools of the day, in the form of VPNs and proxy servers.

To understand children's tech use, and the potential risks our children are up against, **Qustodio investigated tweens and teens' use of apps and AI** across a range of ages: Gen Alpha's iPad kids, aged 7-9, 10-12 year-olds, most likely using their own smartphone for the first time, 13-15 year olds newly navigating adolescence, and the last members of Gen Z, aged 16-18. Our new report is designed to **give families, educators and policy-makers insight into how children navigate the digital world**, the risks specific to them in each age group, and expert advice to help ensure their safety.

The clamour for social media bans is louder than ever before. But, rather than panic, **what our teens and tweens really need is for us to step up for them.** To educate, advocate, and support them as they navigate their way online. Together, we can be the changemakers, helping our kids benefit from the brighter side of technology, while working to free them from the darkness.



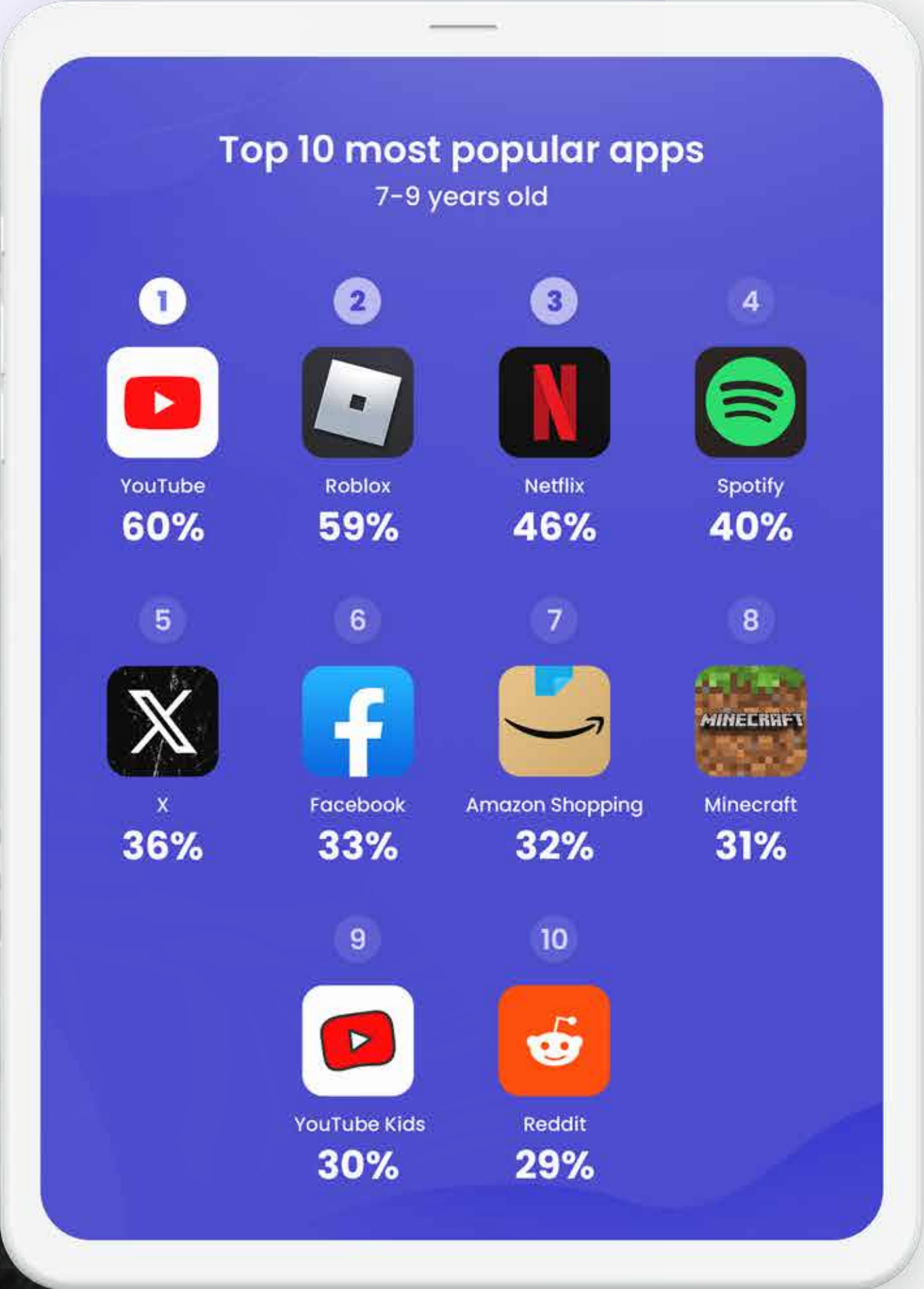
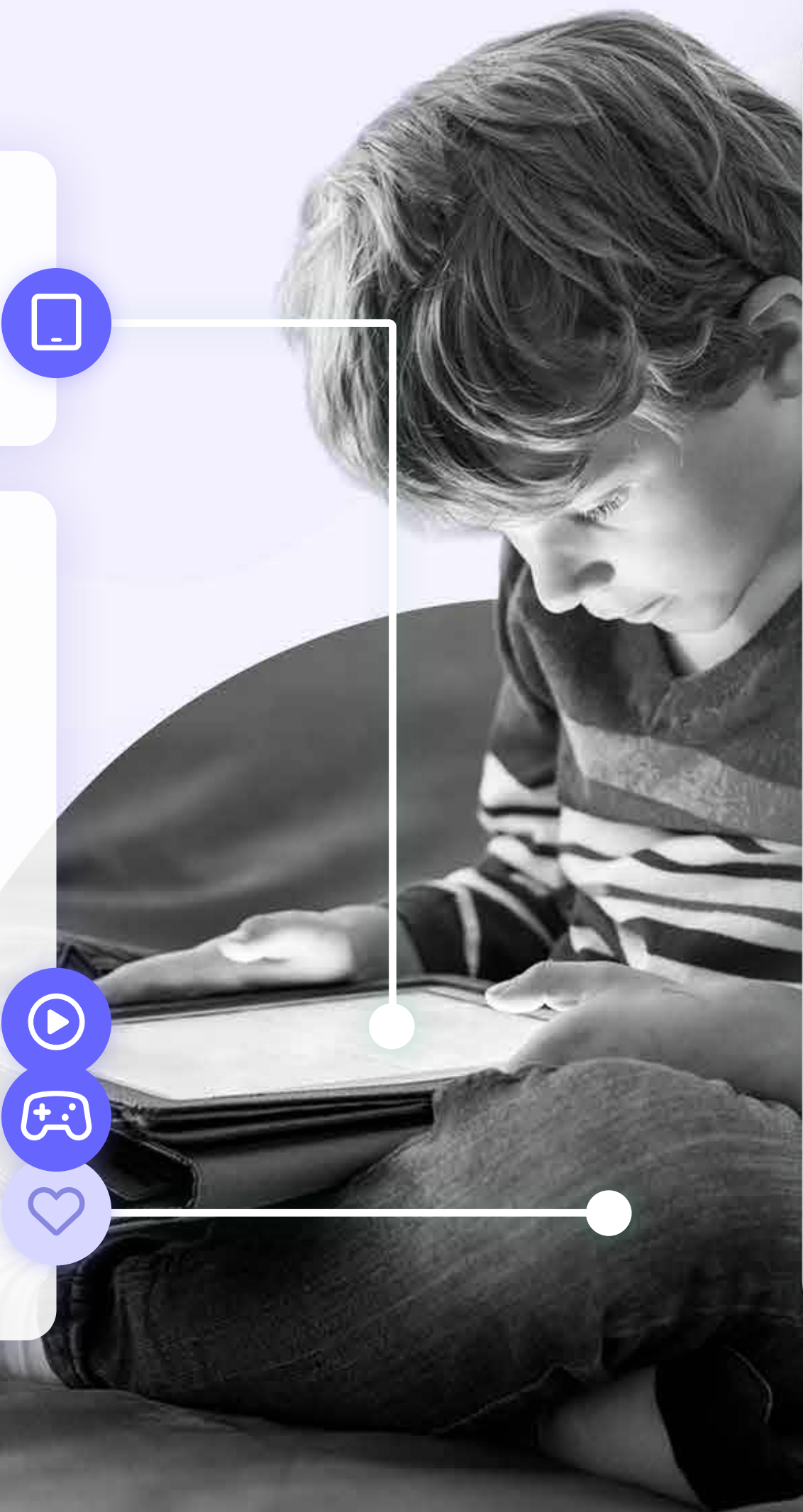
GEN ALPHA

7-9 years old

Tech personality: iPad kids.

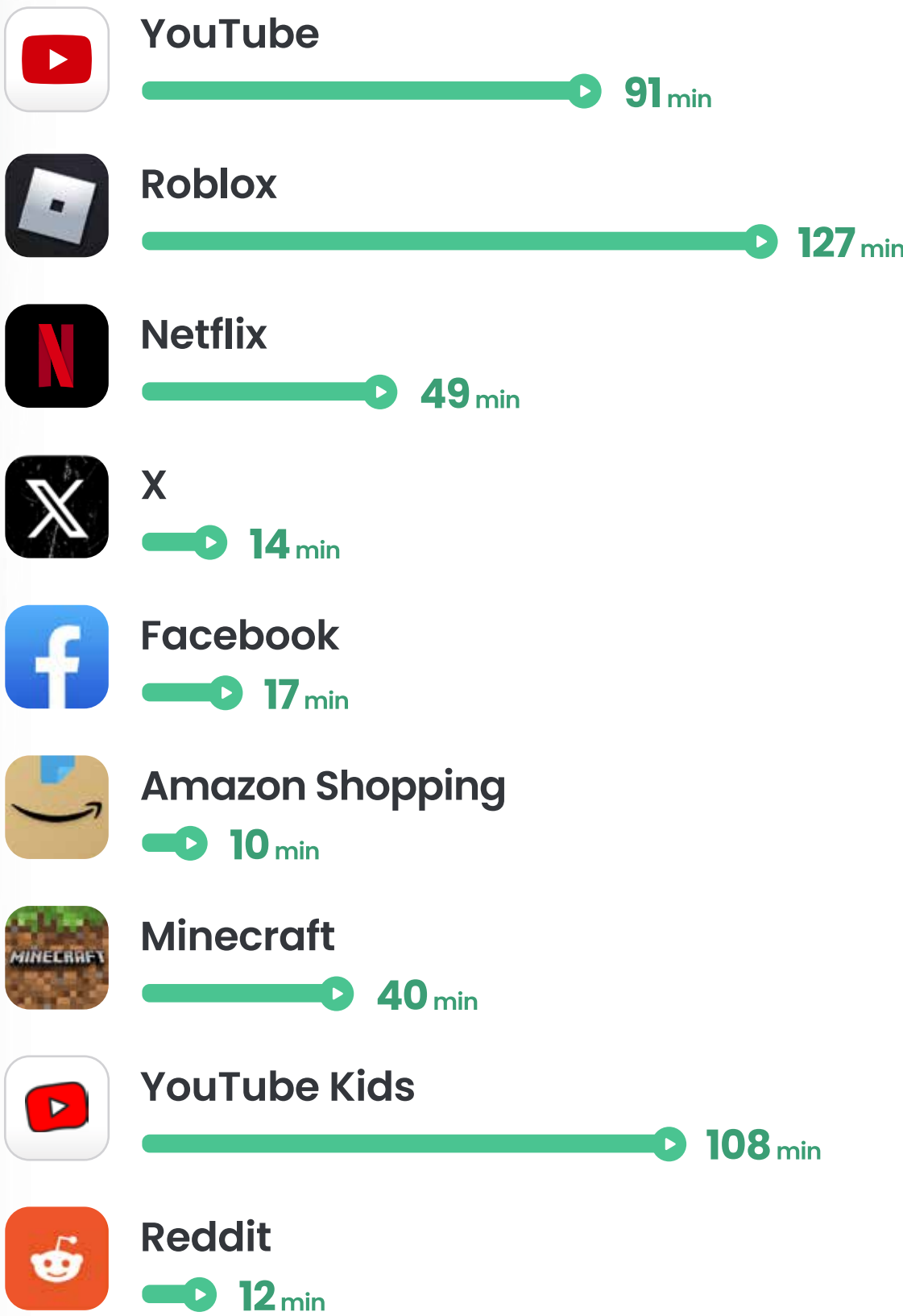
Children this age largely use apps on a tablet: [57% of kids have their own.](#)

Key behaviors: Streaming and gaming dominate young Gen Alpha's top 10, with kids dedicating most of their time to video platforms like **YouTube**, **Netflix**, and **YouTube Kids**. Despite not being able to officially use it, 7-9 year olds are beginning to experiment with social media, exploring platforms such as **X**, **Facebook**, and **Reddit**. **Roblox** is 7-9 year olds' game of choice: almost 60% of them play, racking up over 2 hours of gameplay on the average day.



Time spent on most popular apps *

Average mins/day, ranked from most to least popular



*Apps such as Spotify typically run in the background, meaning minutes of active use per day are not calculated.

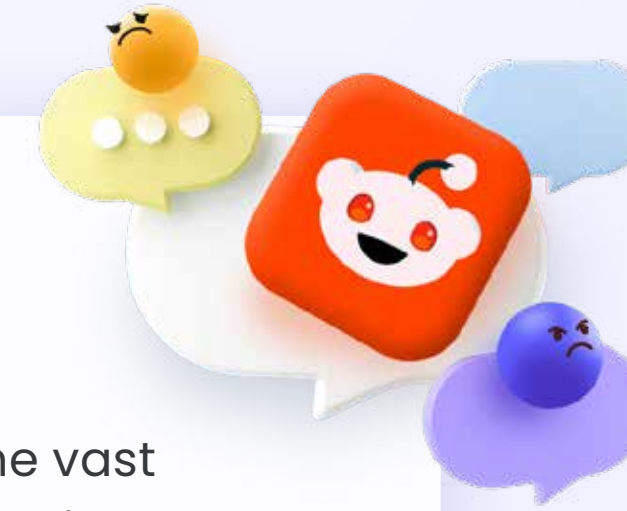
Things to watch for

GEN ALPHA 7-9 years old



Almost 2 in 5 7-9 year olds already use **X**, famed for its **potential exposure to hate speech, porn, and disinformation**: [according to reports](#), adult content now makes up 13% of all posts on X.

Reddit is famed for its easy access to NSFW (not safe for work) content. Communities promoting extremist views, showcasing violence and gore, or posting pornography can easily be found across the vast Reddit network. As a discussion forum, **it's easy for children to encounter abuse, cyberbullies, and trolls taking advantage of the platform's anonymous nature.**



The urge to shop until you drop online also starts young: **31% of kids are already using Amazon** to create wishlists, browse for those must-have items, and make purchases with a single click. At this age, supervision and parental controls should be in place to avoid any surprise orders.



While kids around the world play **Roblox**, so do adults. Some games may contain **inappropriate or sexual content**, so parents need to stay informed and involved with the games their child plays at this age.

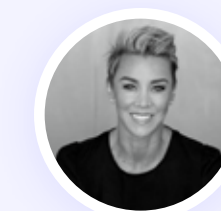


Gen Alpha are already opening social media accounts, even at this age, and despite **X, Reddit, and Facebook's 13-and-over age gate**. This early use can set children up for social media addiction, while also **exposing them to darker areas of the internet** at an age when they are not developmentally ready for it.

Expert tip:

Under the [COPPA](#) rule, children are required to be 13 years or older to use social media platforms. **It is important to establish clear family expectations** to abide by the rules from the start of a child's technology journey and **control access to platforms that are inappropriate** for younger children.

While a lot of parents worry about social media use, it's important to keep in mind that gaming sites can be equally as dangerous with many adults using platforms designed for children. Be sure to **use in-game parental controls** in addition to device controls for the safest experience for your child.



Yasmin London

Global online safety expert, Qoria

GEN ALPHA

10-12 years old

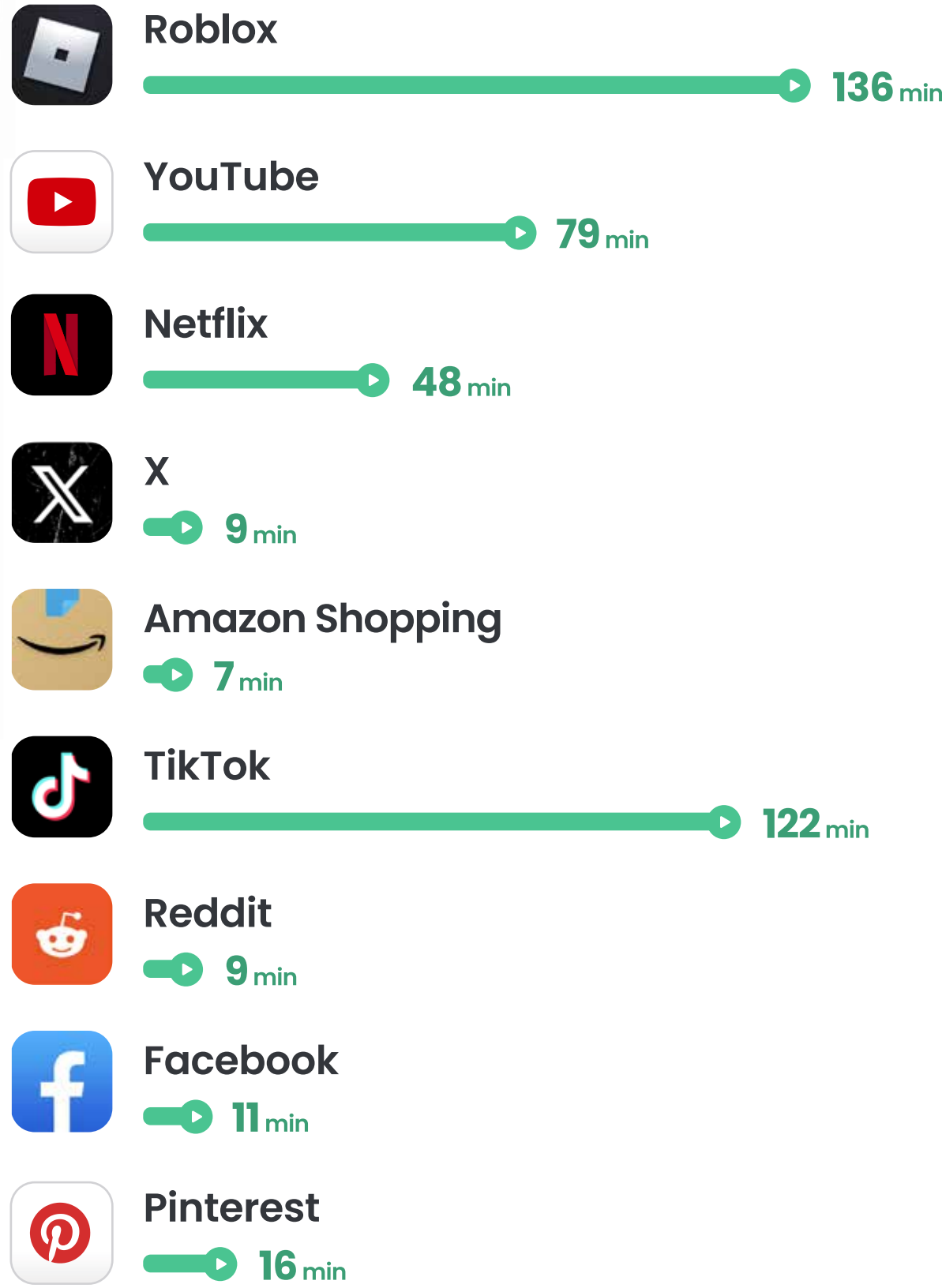
Tech personality: Early smartphone users. Nearly half (47%) of Australian kids aged 10-12 [have their own smartphone](#), and with a [third of schools in Australia](#) having a “Bring Your Own Device” (BYOD) policy, many students have access to their own computer.

Key behaviors: Gaming and entertainment still reign strong at this age, but as smartphones are introduced, so too is increased social media use. Almost 2 in 5 kids this age use **TikTok**, watching clip after clip for much longer than the time they dedicate to online video platform **YouTube**. Half of this age group’s top 10 are social media apps, where they spend longer on average than on more traditional entertainment platforms such as **Netflix**.



Time spent on most popular apps *

Average mins/day, ranked from most to least popular



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Things to watch for

GEN ALPHA 10-12 years old



Gen Alpha's 10-12 year olds consume content on **TikTok for over 2 hours a day**. Assuming the average video is 30 seconds long, that's easily 240 videos, exposing kids to a range of content that may be inappropriate for their age group, and affecting their ability to focus and concentrate.



Mature content is easy to find on platforms such as **Reddit** and **X**. While X has never banned porn, it recently updated guidelines, allowing users to "share consensually produced and distributed adult nudity or sexual behavior".

Online trends can push kids at this age towards **purchases that aren't age-appropriate**. Tween girls are influenced to curate skincare routines full of ingredients that can harm their skin at a young age, and on shopping platforms like **Amazon**, it's difficult to distinguish real products from the fake, potentially harmful ones.



As kids this age "graduate" from **YouTube Kids to YouTube**, despite YouTube Kids being aimed at young people aged 13 and under, the contained environment disappears, and family-friendly content becomes diluted.

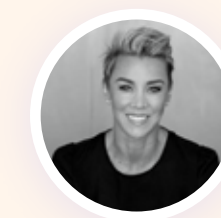


For young boys, content coming from "[The Manosphere](#)" – a network of online communities touting **extreme misogyny** – can be easily found on **Reddit**, **X**, and through podcasts on **Spotify**. These groups promote ideas of masculinity that easily appeal to young boys and have significant influence on their perceptions of gender roles.

Expert tip:

Globally, the average age a young person will first view pornography occurs before they turn 13 years old. Often, this is not because they intentionally seek it out, **but because they will stumble upon it by accident**. Risks are front and centre for tweens, so it's helpful for parents to be prepared by following the A-B-C online safety model. 'A' stands for managing access.

Consider the ways you can restrict or prevent inadvertent access to problematic content or people through in-app or device controls. 'B' stands for boundaries. **Make sure your child knows there are rules around how they behave online**, and what your expectations are of them if something goes wrong. 'C' stands for communication. Talk early, openly and often with younger kids about the risks of the online world. Make it clear that they can come to you for help no matter what.



Yasmin London

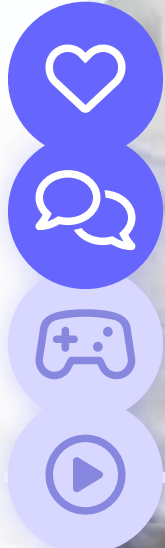
Global online safety expert, Qoria

GEN ALPHA

13-15 years old

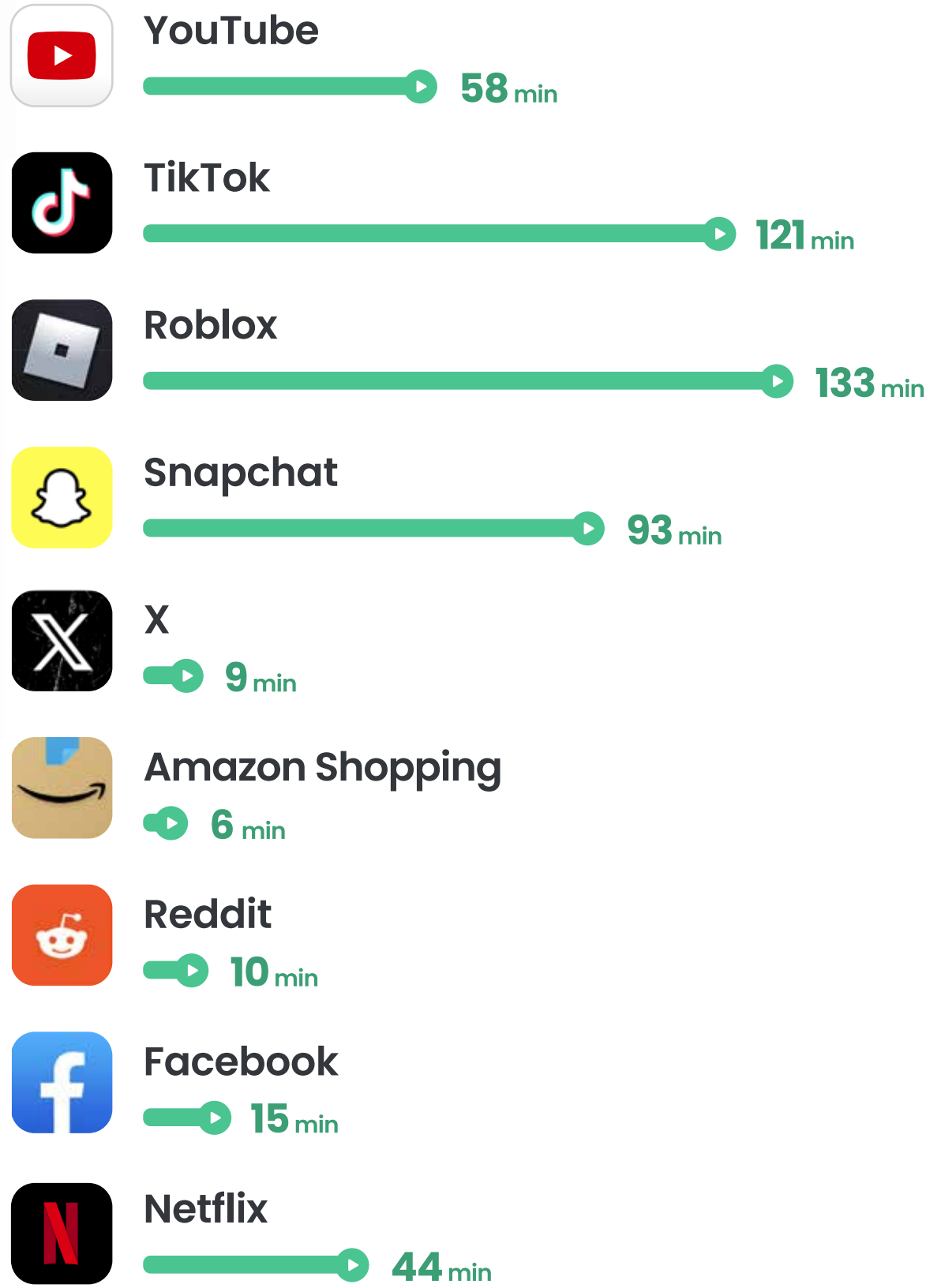
Tech personality: Tech all-rounders – frequent **smartphone** users, often with their own **school device**. Device use at this age often becomes less family-focused and more solitary.

Key behaviors: At this age, a child's social life is tied heavily to their smartphone. They use it for entertainment, to communicate with friends and family, arrange plans, do school work, and stay in the loop. As solo use increases, so does use of apps like **Spotify**, keeping them company as they walk, study, and socialise. While use of gaming apps declines, communication apps like **Snapchat** become more prominent in their lives, and social media use rises again, while engagement with video platforms begins to drop. Teens are much more aware of **AI tools** and become more likely to interact with them frequently, using them for tasks rather than simple experimentation.



Time spent on most popular apps *

Average mins/day, ranked from most to least popular



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Things to watch for

GEN ALPHA 13-15 years old



Teens this age use **Snapchat** as a communication tool, but it doesn't come without its own set of risks. Disappearing photos and messages can embolden kids in many ways, from **sexting and sending nudes, to cyberbullying and sending hateful messages.**

Spotify isn't just a music app - **explicit content** can be found outside of song lyrics, in podcasts, and user-generated playlists containing audio porn and sexual imagery. A family plan can help parents keep track of their child's listening experience.



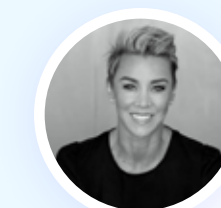
Almost half of 13-15 year olds have a **TikTok** account, which at this age is allowed, but it's still important to **keep the conversation flowing about social media and online video**, especially platforms like TikTok that serve content based on an algorithm. The bottomless scroll and endless autoplay is designed to be addictive, and hard to break free from.



Expert tip:

At this age, teens crave independence and autonomy, but developmentally, they still have poor impulse control. This is why **cyberbullying and toxic online behaviours can dramatically increase during these years.** As parents, it's critical to understand the balance of safety and online participation, so it's important to grant them some freedom, however, maintain control.

Although **kids this age may seem mature and push for unrestricted access**, they often make decisions based on emotion rather than reason so appropriate guardrails in place to support their technology use is crucial, both within apps and on devices.



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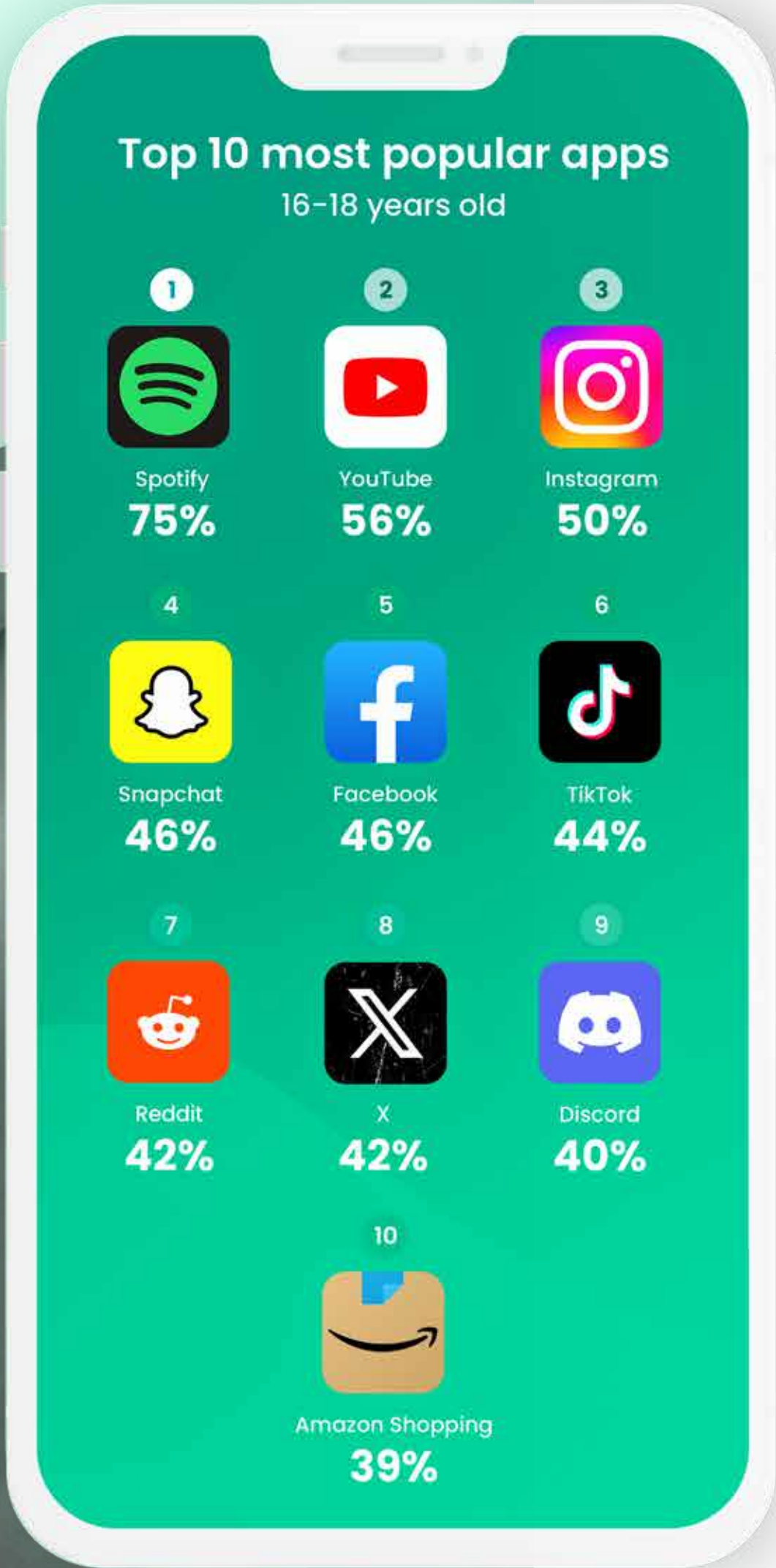
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GEN Z

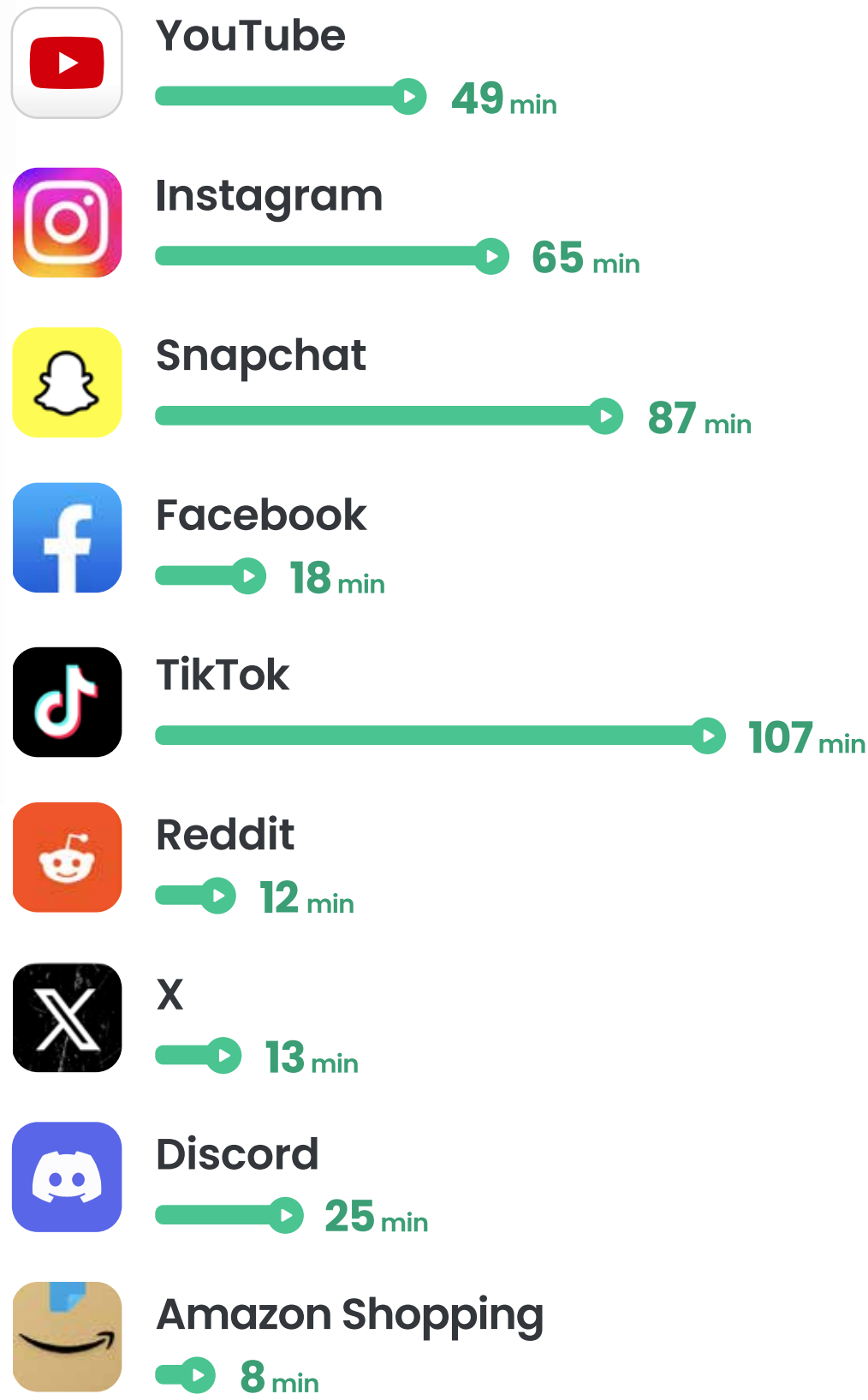
16-18 years old

Tech personality: True digital natives. The last of Gen Z have grown up connected, and at this age their tech use is a good indicator of the way they'll use it as they navigate adult life.

Key behaviors: Device use connects older teens through **communication and social networks**: 7 out of the top 10 apps fall into these two categories. Gaming is a thing of the past, while social networks take center stage, particularly as a way to share instead of just consume, seen through interest in photo sharing apps like **Instagram**. Older teens spend more time on community-based platforms, communicating through **Discord**, and exploring **Reddit**'s vast subreddit network.



Time spent on most popular apps *
Average mins/day, ranked from most to least popular



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Things to watch for

GEN Z 16-18 years old

Smartphone use at this age is a good indicator of how older teens will be using their tech in the adult world. Parents can loosen digital reigns, while also **allowing teens to show them how they can behave responsibly online.**



At this stage, teens are heavier users of **social media**. They need to be equipped with **tools and strategies to help manage their mental health and wellbeing**, and understand the effect that their device may have on both. While parents may wish to relax the rules, it's still important to **maintain healthy tech boundaries**, while modelling healthy behaviour both online and offline.



At a critical time in their education, it's important to minimise any distractions older teens might have from their studies. While **technology** can be an aid in their education, it **needs to be used as a tool for good. Limiting application use and setting up tech schedules** can be beneficial to help older teens focus on their studies.



Expert tip:

By this age, teens are often reasonably self-sufficient and confident in their digital interactions, so **communication and trust are a parent's most powerful tools.**

Regularly integrate discussions about the online world as well as the physical world when talking to your teen, ensuring your approach is curious and non-judgmental. Encourage your teen to think critically about the content they encounter and the situations they experience, and **focus on helping them establish positive digital habits for their future** and their contribution to the online world.



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Global online safety expert, Qoria

AI uptake across the ages

The arrival of AI signals a new dawn for the internet: similar to millennial children exploring dial-up for the first time in the 90s, **AI will mark a clear “before” and “after”**. Its acceptance has been rocky so far, especially in education. [After initially restricting the use of ChatGPT](#), ministers built a national framework for the tool across 2023, attempting to catch up with children across the country already using the tool for everything from homework help to study tips.

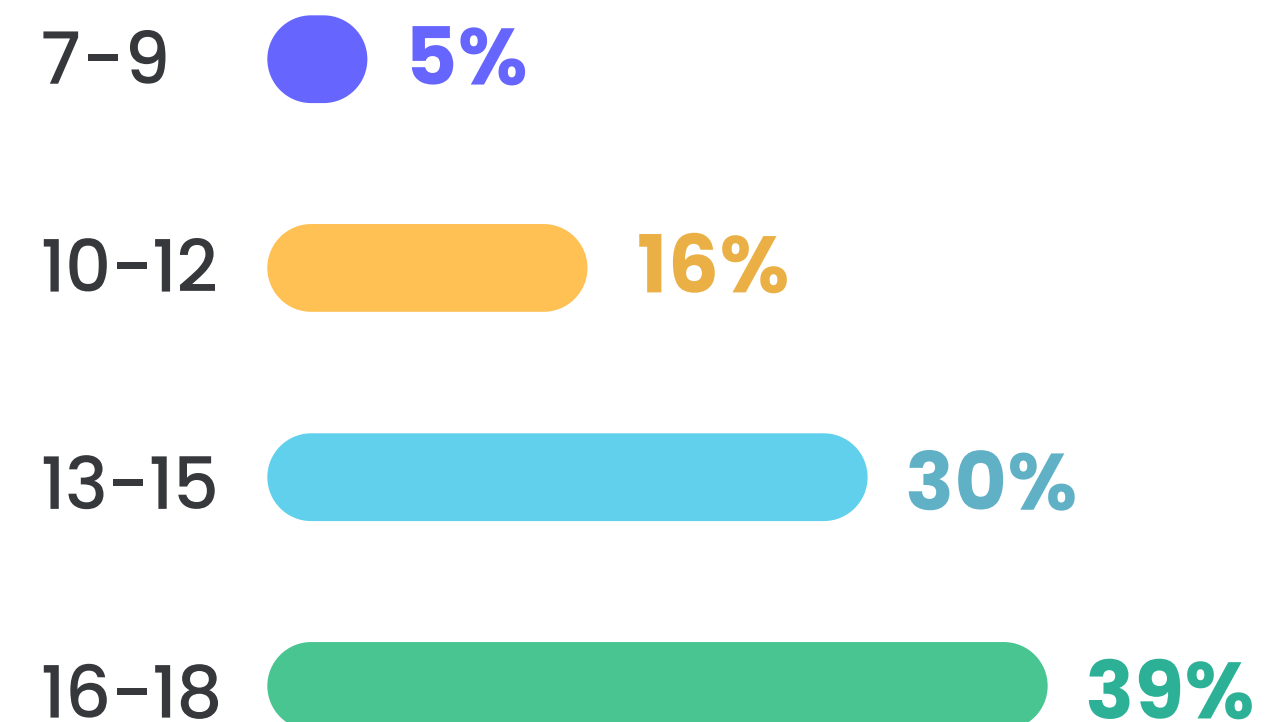
Because the ChatGPT app was not released until mid-2023, **we focused exclusively on uptake of the OpenAI website**, investigating how many children used the infamous chatbot across its landmark year, to gauge how popular artificial intelligence really is among the youngest generations.

For the younger ranks of Generation Alpha, AI is a tool to dabble with, but as the figures

suggest, **teens are much more aware of AI tools and become more likely to interact with them frequently**, using them for tasks rather than simple experimentation. AI becomes significantly more relevant for the Gen Z age group, with **almost 2 in 5 16–18 year olds using ChatGPT**, figuring out how it will fit into their daily lives going forward.

As AI evolves, and is integrated into virtually every app we use, this exposure will continue to grow. There’s no doubt that **our children will be graduating into a world where AI technologies are part of their day-to-day life**. Using them responsibly and correctly is a skill parents and educators must develop to help young people navigate these new technologies effectively.

% of kids using OpenAI



Tips to help kids, tweens and teens stay safe online:



Restrict chat features.

Games such as Roblox are a good way for children to play and be creative, but always with caution. On games, make sure to utilise any native parental controls to restrict chats and set up rules for who can message your child.



Keep social media age-appropriate.

Most social media companies set their age restrictions to 13+. While this doesn't mean every social media app is appropriate for teenagers, the content and nature of these applications isn't for young kids, by design. Even if they're not officially allowed to use social media, tweens are either aware of or using social media, so it's important to talk about why they want to, and for parents to explain why age limits exist.



Don't share payment information.

Keep your card details private, and avoid any surprises by keeping any payment details off your child's devices. Make sure children understand the connection between "digital" money and real-life cash, and just like with pocket money, you may want to set up rules and limits for tech spending.



Set a good example.

Kids look to their parents and other adult figures in their lives to set the pace. It's key to show children what healthy device use looks like from an early age. Set tech boundaries that work for your family, but some good rules of thumb to follow are: no devices at mealtimes, keeping eyes off devices during a conversation, and reduced (to no) device use before bedtime.



Investigate for yourself.

If your kids are using social media and AI tools, while you're left behind, it's difficult to understand what they are up against or the best ways that they can use this type of technology. If you don't want to create a social media account, do your research and understand what type of risk they're facing when scrolling through social media. Test out AI tools to stay ahead of the game and trial new platforms together with your child – exploring together can help you bond and understand new technologies as one.



Set healthy limits.

Switch off the autoplay, make use of parental controls to set limits on apps, and establish tech schedules that help your child manage their device use. Creating routines for areas such as study, entertainment, and bedtime helps set boundaries and lets your teen know what is expected from them.



Keep conversation open.

Be a safe space for your children to confide in. They're learning to navigate the online world, and judging them more often than not simply ensures they're less likely to come to you with their problems and issues. Have age-appropriate, ongoing conversation about the risks technology brings, as well as the benefits, and share your own stories – with decades of online experience, you probably have more in common than you think.

ABOUT US

Founded in 2012 by cyber-security experts Eduardo Cruz, Josep Gaspar, and Josh Gabel, Qustodio is the global leader in online safety and digital wellbeing for families. In 2022, Qustodio became part of the Qoria group, protecting every child's digital journey through a world class collaboration between schools, parents, and educators in cyber safety. Qoria's mission is to support families and schools to live and navigate smarter in an increasingly connected world. Together, we help millions of families and educators across the globe protect children from online harm, while promoting healthy digital habits and awareness.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on anonymous app and online tool usage, provided from **≈19,000 Australian families with children between the ages of 7–18**. It reveals their **app habits and use of AI on mobile and desktop devices**, from January 1, 2023, to December 31, 2023, ranking applications in terms of popularity (percentage of users) and time spent (average minutes per day).

Contact us

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