

Connected Rangatahi

Digital inclusion in the age of AI

Te Rourou
One Aotearoa Foundation



Brainbox
Institute

October 2026



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Introduction

Te Rourou, One Aotearoa Foundation, the philanthropic foundation of One New Zealand, has invested in communities across Aotearoa New Zealand since its establishment in 2002. Since 2016, the Foundation has focused its strategy on reducing the exclusion and disadvantage experienced by rangatahi, with the goal of creating a more equitable Aotearoa.

Digital equity has been an important part of this work, recognising the increasingly essential role digital connection plays in accessing the opportunities which enable rangatahi to thrive.

Te Rourou has taken a participatory approach to research and evaluation, recognising the importance of hearing directly from the people most affected by the issues being explored. For this research, that meant creating space for rangatahi to describe their own digital experiences, in their own words.

In partnership with One New Zealand, Te Rourou worked with Brainbox Institute and youth-focused organisations across Aotearoa to explore what digital inclusion looks like for rangatahi today. The aim was to generate practical insights grounded in the experiences and perspectives of young people themselves.



Executive summary

Digital connection is no longer optional for rangatahi (predominantly young people aged 16-24 years old). It is a necessary part of everyday life. It enables education, employment, access to services, personal finances, hobbies, and, most importantly, connection with whānau, friends and communities. This research explored what digital inclusion looks like for rangatahi today, drawing directly on their experiences and perspectives through a participatory approach with youth-focused organisations across Aotearoa New Zealand.

The research shows that while rangatahi see clear and meaningful benefits from being connected, significant barriers remain. Cost and reliability can make it difficult to stay connected, with device costs, mobile data, power outages and poor connectivity particularly affecting those already experiencing disadvantage. Losing connection can have immediate consequences for learning, work, communication and access to essential services.

At the same time, the online environment is becoming harder to navigate safely and with confidence. Rangatahi described concerns about bullying, scams, harmful content, social media impacts and the effects of overuse on wellbeing. Trust is also becoming more difficult, with misinformation, scams and the rapid growth of generative AI making it harder to know what is real online. While some rangatahi are finding practical and positive uses for AI, their overall perspectives reflect significant uncertainty about its implications for trust, learning, work, society and the future.



Executive summary continued

Importantly, rangatahi are not simply describing problems. They are actively developing skills, adapting their behaviour and finding solutions to stay connected and navigate digital risks. They also want to be genuinely heard and involved in decisions about the digital environments they use. The research highlights their capability to understand the complexity of these issues and contribute to practical, solution-focused action.

Taken together, the findings point to a digital inclusion agenda that must evolve with the realities of rangatahi lives and the emergence of AI. The report identifies three priorities:

- 1. Treating reliable and affordable connection as essential**
- 2. Strengthening safety and trust in digital environments into the AI age**
- 3. Building authentic participation of rangatahi in shaping our digital future.**

Importantly, leadership on digital inclusion should be developed in partnership with rangatahi, recognising them not only as users of digital technologies, but as experts in their own experiences and contributors to the solutions. This includes sustained support for youth development and leadership work across contributing sectors, including the areas of research, policy, education, skills and capacity building programmes.

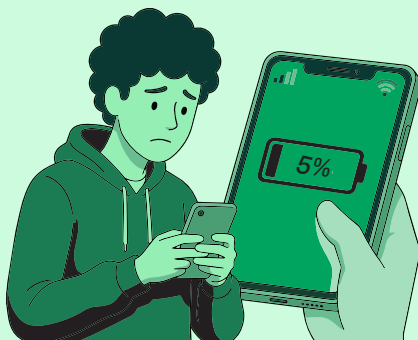
6 key themes



Cost



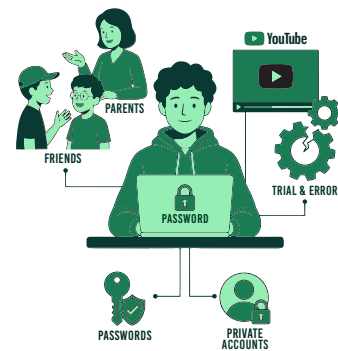
Trust



Physical Access



Safety



Skills



Empowerment

Research Context

Grounding our understanding of digital equity, historical progress, and structural community barriers in New Zealand.



Digital Equity in Aotearoa

Digital inclusion has been a decades long area of work in Aotearoa New Zealand. From the arrival of the Internet in the 1990s, it has become a ubiquitous part of everyday life and many transformations across our economy and communities have been driven and enabled by Internet access.

Digital inclusion work is the collective, enduring challenge that requires cross-sector collaboration and systems change to build and ensure digital equity, because Internet access is not the same as equity or inclusion. This work has been necessary, and complex, as the Internet becomes key to equitable access to education, work, goods and services.

Useful definitions, which can help frame digital equity and inclusion, shared by the Digital Equity Coalition Aotearoa (DECA)¹ are :

Digital equity exists when everyone can access and effectively use digital technologies so as to participate in our society, democracy and economy. Digital equity is our ultimate goal.

Digital inclusion refers to the initiatives and actions we undertake as we work towards digital equity. Digital inclusion is the means to achieve the goal.

While there are high levels of internet connectivity in Aotearoa New Zealand overall, and most people access the internet daily, there is an ongoing need for “inclusive strategies to ensure equitable access and responsible use”, according to the 2025 World Internet Project report.²

Digital equity gaps remain across communities in Aotearoa³ with 1 in 10 New Zealanders still not online at all, and people of Māori, Pacific, and rural backgrounds, as well as youth and disabled people, still have greater digital exclusion than others.

1 <https://www.digitalequity.nz/>
2 https://nzpri.aut.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1073906/WIP-NZ-Report-2025_InternetNZ.pdf
3 <https://www.digitalequity.nz/statistics>

Out of the Maze: grounding perspectives on digital inclusion

One important grounding for this research report, is the Out of the Maze: building digitally inclusive communities report¹ published in 2018 and commissioned by Vodafone NZ Foundation (the predecessor to Te Rourou) and InternetNZ. This report, which focused on young people and parents and caregivers of school-aged children in Aotearoa New Zealand, highlighted how digital inclusion is essential for social inclusion, and that to participate fully, people need affordable devices and internet access, available where and when they need it, along with the motivation, skills, and trust to use digital tools for meaningful social and economic outcomes.

This research also emphasised that losing access can be devastating, especially for people already facing other forms of disadvantage and during moments of vulnerability, when it can compound harm and limit access to safety, support, and opportunity. The research offered practical ideas for improving digital inclusion in Aotearoa – from national policy changes to community and whānau-level actions – advocating that solutions must be multi-layered and cross-sector.



¹ <https://internetnz.nz/assets/Archives/out-of-the-maze.pdf>

Digital inclusion: 2018 to today

Since 2018, we have seen concerted action, through multi-layered and cross-sector work, on digital inclusion. Government leadership and action has included the Digital Inclusion Blueprint published by the Department of Internal Affairs in 2019 setting a vision for everyone in the country to have the access, skills, motivation, and trust needed to participate in and benefit from the digital world.

Digital access and connection patterns also evolved rapidly as people adapted during the Covid pandemic response from 2020, with rapid digitalisation of services and programmes to ensure equitable digital access when more services, employment and education activities needed to take place online¹.

Digital inclusion in a te Tiriti o Waitangi context is also an important and specific consideration for Aotearoa. In late 2020, a piece of government research Digital inclusion user insights – Māori² brought some te ao Māori perspectives on digital inclusion, which included the experience of the necessity of being online: “Some people weren’t able to access food or help services because they simply couldn’t see what support was on offer. It was all online.”

This research also shared some views about rangatahi, with one research participant saying:

A photograph of two young Māori women. The woman on the left is wearing a blue baseball cap and a grey shirt, smiling at the camera. The woman on the right is wearing a pink shirt and a black beanie, laughing with her mouth open. They are standing in front of a white, vertically-slatted wall.

“Our rangatahi are all digital. If it were up to me, I’d give rangatahi complete freedom to grow and learn in the digital world. To me, that’s the way to give our kids a way to design a culturally-inclusive future.”

¹
²

<https://www.digital.govt.nz/showcase/tackling-the-digital-divide-during-covid-19>
<https://www.digital.govt.nz/dmsdocument/177-report-digital-inclusion-user-insights-maori/html>

CONNECTED RANGATAHI: DIGITAL INCLUSION IN THE AGE OF AI

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This Digital Inclusion Blueprint programme of work, which included a range of digital inclusion research, concluded in 2023,¹ and by 2025 government pandemic-related programmes and device supports also finished.²

Outside government, work by and collaboration between private sector and community organisations, such as through the Digital Inclusion Alliance Aotearoa³ and the founding of DECA⁴ have advanced a range of digital inclusion efforts. Ongoing work continues through national and community-led initiatives to address digital equity challenges.

In the last few years digital inclusion work in Aotearoa New Zealand has been challenged by global developments, including a quickly emerging new technology landscape. Key developments include the growth in widespread use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), and impacts associated with a period of increased global economic and geopolitical uncertainty.

The proliferation of AI generated content online has brought excitement about potential positive transformations and benefits but also seen concerns and criticisms surface around how AI and new technologies can impact trust and safety online, a key digital inclusion area of work. We have also seen research into “Dark Patterns” indicate that online influence and digital deception are significant issues to be addressed around online experiences for many in Aotearoa New Zealand.⁵

Global events during the 2020s, including international conflicts and supply chain disruptions, have had impacts on digital inclusion work as well. These have contributed to the cost of living and the cost of devices and technology components, which in turn contribute to cost barriers. Also contributing to cost barriers for people is the growth in unemployment in Aotearoa since 2021, with youth experiencing the largest increase in underemployment and unemployment in recent 2026 reporting.⁶

¹ <https://www.digital.govt.nz/digital-government/key-areas-of-work/finished/digital-inclusion/digital-inclusion-research>
² <https://www.education.govt.nz/parents-and-caregivers/schools-year-0-13/digital-technology/equitable-digital-access-eda-device-decommission>
³ <https://digitalinclusionalliance.nz/>
⁴ <https://internetnz.nz/news-and-articles/five-point-plan-digital-inclusion-covid-19-and-beyond/>
⁵ <https://campaigns.consumer.org.nz/invisible-influence-dark-patterns-and-digital-deception-in-aotearoa-new-zealand>
⁶ <https://www.stats.govt.nz/news/unemployment-rate-at-5-6-percent-in-the-june-2026-quarter/>



Youth and digital inclusion today

Research published around youth perspectives on their digital experiences also give us valuable insights relevant to digital inclusion in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Ka whakahuatau te rangatahi mō te Toiora Youth wellbeing insights report was published in May 2023 by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, saying:

“Social media and digital spaces are deeply integrated into many rangatahi Māori and young people’s lives, with both benefits and harms. Young people want their online world to be safe and supportive, and platforms to be responsible for regulating and monitoring harmful material on social media.”

There are a range of online safety initiatives in Aotearoa, including through initiatives like Netsafe’s Headspace Invaders launched in 2025¹, which focus on educating young people to support their navigation of digital challenges..

The Digital Resilience Research Report 2025-2026² by TOROA Centre for Communication Research and Netsafe New Zealand, shared rich insights around the difficulties that exist when ideas about what young people need don’t match the reality and don’t have the impact that is intended, saying:

“Generic messages, advice that underestimated young people’s existing knowledge, overly moralising tones and content that positioned online safety primarily as an individual responsibility were often dismissed by students as obvious, patronising or irrelevant.”

“... it highlighted a misalignment between adult assumptions and youth realities, creating an opportunity to re-evaluate safety strategies...”

1
2

<https://resource.netsafe.org.nz/Game-On!-Headspace-Invaders-Media-Release-FINAL.pdf>
<https://resource.netsafe.org.nz/DigitalResilienceReport-revised.pdf>

Online safety considerations

Alongside important work on how to support online safety for young people, and work with them, there has been growing popularity globally for a political response to concerns around youth online safety: specifically the introduction of age-based platform blocking legislation. Regulation has been introduced in a number of places, now in force in the United Kingdom and Australia, that bans under-16 year olds from accessing some online platforms, with a focus on social media. These regulatory frameworks are very new and there are unclear results from them so far¹, with similar legislation being explored in New Zealand now.

Addressing online safety concerns through regulation that bans people based on their age is a challenging but important topic for digital inclusion work to acknowledge. Digital inclusion work has always required navigating safety and trust issues as well as supporting access to enable the many benefits that flow from potential online activities.

In the **Children and young people's perspectives on a safer digital world: Mokopuna voices report** published earlier this year by Mana Mokopuna Children's Commissioner, children and young people's perspectives on a safer digital world were brought forward² saying:

“Children and young people are experts in their own lives, and they have a right to be involved in decisions that affect them. The online world is a core part of their everyday reality, and they understand both the risks and the benefits in ways adults often don't.”

This report seeks to build on the digital inclusion work done over the years in Aotearoa New Zealand, centring rangatahi and young people's perspectives around digital inclusion, from their own digital experiences, and empowering rangatahi to contribute towards a strong, digital future for Aotearoa New Zealand.

1
2

<https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/australias-age-ban-three-months-what-were-learning>
<https://www.manamokopuna.org.nz/publications/reports/children-and-young-peoples-perspectives-on-a-safer-digital-world/>

Research Insights



Motivation is clear

We asked rangatahi what they use the internet for and how it is most useful or important to them. Having the 'motivation' to be connected was something explored a lot in digital inclusion work, and research, and we wanted to understand their perspectives on why they go online.

Rangatahi were very clear that it is not just useful or important, **the Internet is required**. They shared the many ways Internet access is woven into every aspect of their lives - family, jobs, friendships, hobbies, banking, shopping. Some clear themes also emerged around digital connection being most valuable around **human connection**. It also made a huge impact for **learning and enabling growth and development**.

"it's a tool"

"as someone, a neurodiverse person, it is really helpful to have like I use them apps, all the apps, for like mental health."

"you're never really unplugged"



Connection is required

Rangatahi shared that Internet access is a necessary tool for everyday life. They need to be online for lots of things related to work, activities, education and personal finances. The world is the world - there isn't an online versus offline world - and being connected is how lots of things get done now. Using the Internet is needed, and even preferred for some things because it can support accessibility and save time.

“..it’s not really a choice, everything is basically online, you know, interviews, meetings, communication, you know, online banking, everything is done via online and it’s part of the new, you know normal. The new cycle of how things are done.”

“No matter who you ask nowadays, technology is a big part of a lot of teenagers lives”



“I think that online is something that’s essential for nowadays. Like, I think it would be a disadvantage if you grew up and weren’t allowed to be connected to the internet and stuff because you’d be so far behind.”

Connection is about people

Strengthening and enabling social, in-person connections was top of mind for rangatahi; connecting with people in their lives is one of the most useful and important things about the Internet!

Keeping in touch with people they know was key - especially those out of town and overseas but also for people they might see often to make plans and keep in contact. For some, making new friendships and relationships around shared activities and interests has also been important to them.



“just the daily contact. So I spend obviously a lot of time online talking to whānau and friends, especially as a lot of them live in different places in the world and the country.”

“my computer has my friends in it. I talk to people all over the world, all the time, all hours of the day, pretty much, and if we go further, the internet and a digital youth group is where I met my partner”

“When my phone got seized, I was like how am I meant to talk to people? I got kinda lost.”

"I taught myself how to fix consoles through YouTube videos."

"...it's good for learning how to fix stuff on your phone and stuff."

"AI taught me how to understand metaphors."

"learned like how to do makeup, like skincare and makeup"

"Last year I wanted to learn bookbinding... and I found like 20 million videos on how to do bookbinding"

"It also gets me learning things, like the majority of things I view or take in through my devices are educational or entertainment with some form of education, whether that be about real world facts or science"

"YouTube taught me how to tie a tie!"

"for your interests, online, there's a lot of spaces where people with the same interests will kinda talk about it and post about it, and that's a very different thing to me than friendship. But still, it needs to be quite inclusive... it's having that connection over a shared interest"

"Can talk to people without having to present yourself in person. This made it more accessible when I was figuring out how I wanted to present myself"

Connection enables learning and growth

Rangatahi shared their experiences of learning how to do stuff, about hobbies, connecting with people interested in the same things, and exploring their interests and identity.



Connectivity barriers

We also asked about what happens if things go wrong - what kinds of things cause problems in getting online or problems you have staying online.

The barriers to connectivity they shared strongly echoed other digital inclusion work done in the past, including issues of cost and reliability of access.



Cost pressure

“Just money. Like, at the end of the day, if I can’t get connected, it’s because I don’t have data”

Cost pressures are a common barrier to using the Internet for the things they need and want to use it for.

Device costs, including for purchase, repair and replacement due to device obsolescence, are barriers. Ongoing cost of access, particularly mobile data cost, is also an issue shared by many.



“Everything is so expensive, like the phones, but then the repair”

“My laptop screen was broken so I couldn’t do my Te Kura work”

“There was a massive one when the phone switched over and 3G like stopped being a thing.”

Access reliability

As highlighted earlier in this report, the Internet is seen as necessary infrastructure for many rangatahi, and many shared their experiences with, and the impacts of, being left with unreliable access.

The need for power was brought up as a challenge and an issue to navigate in order to have reliable Internet connection, including around power cuts in events like storms, and for day-to-day charging of devices, especially in public spaces in the community.

Rural connection issues were highlighted by a number of young people, with experiences of greater connectivity issues for rural locations, both mobile and satellite, as well as disruptions due to losing electricity.

“during a storm where power, WiFi, and charging were lost, it became very difficult to stay connected”

“halfway through the call, something dropped with our internet and I lost connection halfway through a really important meeting”

“The fact that there’s nowhere safe to charge like a device. The mall just shuts their things off, their charging ports off, they just turn off after a certain hour. At the end of the day when I need to walk home, I usually have no way of charging my phone until I get home.”

“can be a bit of a struggle for some families is that when you’re living out in rural places, you can’t get as good (Internet access)”

“When I lived out in the country, we had a few power cuts and that affected my ability to study”



Experience Challenges

Safety and trust are areas that have been a continuing focus in digital inclusion work, and both safety and wellbeing concerns and a growing lack of trust come though strongly as ongoing challenges for rangatahi.

“Social media is just unsafe for young people, very, very young people, and most vulnerable people, especially with scams...”

“I think sometimes it just overwhelms me. Like sometimes I get too many notifications and it’s like very overstimulated. And yeah, I like after that I just feel really tired and irritated.”



Safety and wellbeing

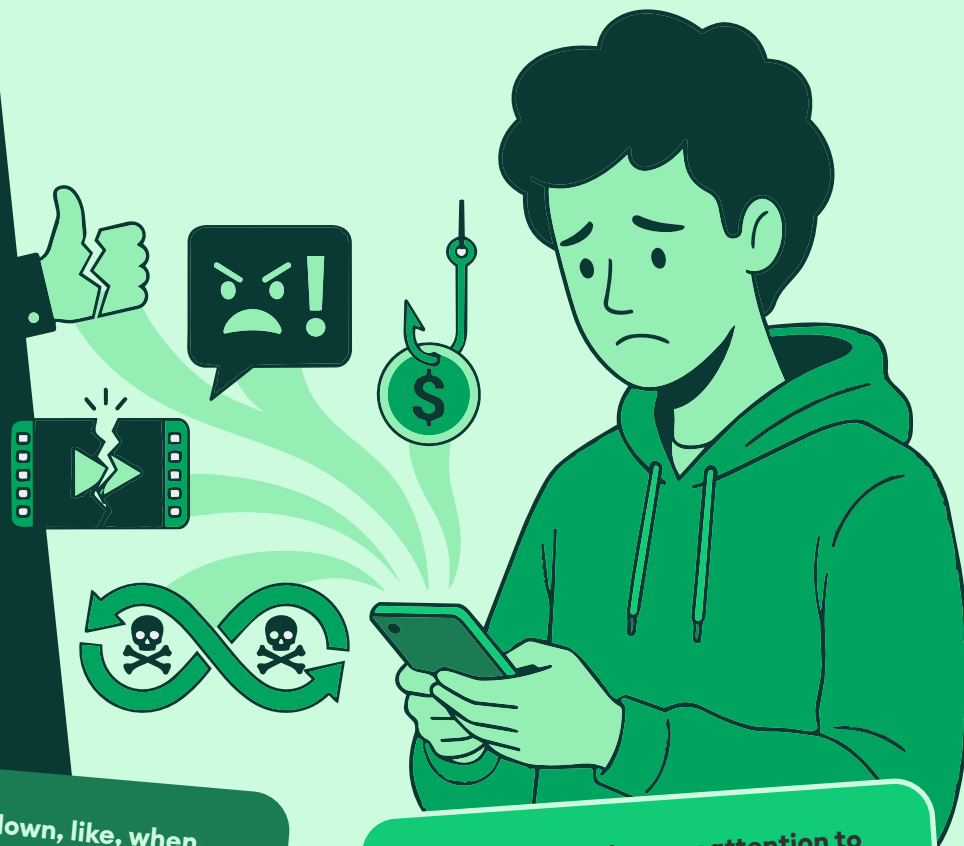
The research heard a lot of concern about safety and wellbeing around online experiences. Rangatahi shared concerns about overuse and its impact, particularly of social media platforms, with concerns about their mental health. These experiences can be stressful, isolating, and led to feeling tired or burnt out.

They expressed strong concern about the impacts and risks of bullying, stalking and scams. They could find themselves accessing or being exposed to harmful or inappropriate content, including in unexpected places like group chats. Rangatahi repeatedly raised particular concern for vulnerable people online, especially the youngest and oldest people, who might not have the skills and experiences to navigate challenges.

“I’ve definitely had friends like who have had really like negative and like unsafe experiences online for sure”

“they kind of got me really down, like, when, if I was like bullied, I used to go and cry in my room and, like, back then when I first started social media I didn’t know what I was doing”

“I’ve like learned to pay attention to how it like affects my feelings. Like sometimes if it feels really draining”



Trust is getting harder

Many rangatahi shared how they approach online interactions without trust. They navigate digital interactions with scepticism and caution, especially if those interactions are with people they do not know in person. Often mentioned were both scams and misinformation, as well as recent AI developments.

Rangatahi shared strong concerns about how hard it can be to know what is real online. Because of scams and misinformation, they had an overarching lack of trust in online environments. The influx of generative AI was often mentioned as making it even more difficult to know what is real and to have trust in content online.

"If it looks like AI, it's AI. If it's probably AI, it's definitely AI, if it might be AI, it's definitely AI.
If it looks kinda like a scam, it's a scam. If you're unsure whether it's a scam or not, it's a scam."

"the AI generated stuff is like a big thing at the moment, not trusting stuff that's AI generated."

"I just think everything is fake...pretty much, as long as if you know, it's not my friends, organisation I work with, I just think it's fake. Like, that how I kind of think. I just think everything's a scam."

"even if there are people like spreading real information, I just kind of assume that everything is untrustworthy."

"It is still difficult to tell what is real and what is fake online."



Solutions oriented

Throughout exploring the barriers and challenges they experience around internet access and in online spaces, rangatahi shared that **they want a better digital future.**

They shared a broad range and depth of experience, and this research found that rangatahi had **a focus on action** in what they do to overcome those obstacles and challenges, to stay connected, safe and get what they need online.

We also asked them what they would like to see done to make being connected online easier, fairer, or safer for young people - including how they might be involved in that work.

Rangatahi expressed **a strong desire to be genuinely heard and involved**, with some clear ideas on how that could (and shouldn't) be done, while also acknowledging the complexities and uncertainties of online challenges.



Want a better digital future

Rangatahi expressed a desire for change. Connectivity is a necessity for daily life. Digital inclusion is immensely important for human connection. Improvements have to be made to address barriers to access and the challenges they face online.

AI is a big part of discussion around the digital future and how it may shape our societies. In using the Internet as a tool for everyday life, some rangatahi shared positive experiences with AI, helping to prepare job applications and to do administrative tasks. But the views they shared about AI were mostly of uncertainty and concern. Trust was the biggest issue but rangatahi also had environmental, social, and big picture societal concerns about AI.

"AI can take or 'steal' other people's work, which feels unfair."

"that's the usual issue with AI, where people become too reliant, become, unwilling to put their own effort in."

"I've had quite negative effects from AI, wherein I was so reliant on it in late high school that I was then became like, I was just getting stupider, so that I cut out of everything."

"I can just hope that the internet turns into a bit of a better place than it can be sometimes. It's not going anywhere, so here's hoping that it at least improves, or that people become more aware of it and more cautious."

"there will always be some element of risk to being on the internet, especially if you are younger or any sort of youth, it's not as guaranteed as I wish it could be."

"it is a way that we can connect, but also it is extremely dangerous at the same time. It's a double-edged sword."

"Helpful AI is okay, like using closed captions or creating 5 word writing prompts. But generative AI is bad and it's everywhere."

Focus on skills and taking action

In this research, many stories were shared by the rangatahi of their active role in shaping the experiences they have while navigating digital environments and connectivity challenges. Rangatahi shared about the ways they put ongoing effort into learning about the ever changing online environment, adapting and building skills to manage challenges.

Rangatahi shared the many ways they have built skills, both formally and informally, including learning skills through experience, as well as from parents, family and friends.

Many shared that their parents have had conversations with them around safety online. Some rangatahi thought that parental controls can be important to help make digital access safer and easier to manage. Education and training around online safety was also mentioned by some rangatahi as having helped them. But learning through experience was something rangatahi talked about most.

“we do a lot of training online and, you know, videos, seminars on safety online, to learn, you know, what a clickbait is and what if something looks a bit dodgy and something that you know could potentially be a scam”

“I learned a lot of things the hard way, a lot of trial and error, a lot of not-so-great experiences that definitely kinda made me more aware of being online and what they actually entails.”

“my parents had told me, don’t talk to strangers, be safe, but much more than that I did have to figure it out myself.”



Rangatahi shared many strategies and lots of solutions they put into practice for access issues

“my neighbour actually lets me use his Wi-Fi so I can do meetings.”

“Having friends with Hotspot really helps.”

“I go for a walk to find the wi-fi

“Yeah I go to my friends house and steal theirs (wifi).”

“Libraries. Honestly, they so underrated. Libraries 100% are such good places for information and for getting back connected with people.”

“I always leave like 5 bucks on there for if I need it.”

“I go to [the local schools], Maccas, the mall has good wifi range”

CONNECTED RANGATAHI: DIGITAL INCLUSION IN THE AGE OF AI

Rangatahi shared some thoughts about the things they do to manage safety and wellbeing concerns. Many shared that they keep their social media account settings private, give false information, or adjust settings to hide personal details and location. Many shared how friends support each other actively to navigate online experiences.

“I use a screentime reduction app so I’m not spending too much time doomscrolling.”

“I haven’t had my actual name online anywhere in like since I started making accounts”

“Got apps that friends used and tried them together”

“I can tell when it feels draining or overwhelming and I’ll like limit my amount of time on social media”

“a lot of my friends we do like... non-phone days and like Wi-Fi free days”

“change my passwords every now and then, I have different passwords on every website... 2FA, blocking tags, not using certain sites and certain apps”



Want to be heard and involved

We also asked rangatahi what they think their role is, and should be, in making the digital future: around the shaping of digital environments, including their design and potential regulation.

They were very interested in being involved, wanting genuine input and offering ideas that showcase their desire for solutions.

Some felt that youth have been left out completely, and some shared concerns about the past efforts around youth participation that they knew of or had experienced.

“...there’s not a lot in the technology world that is youth-led, or that youth have control over.”

“I would want to see more young people being authentically included in decision-making spaces around like social media and digital connectivity companies and organisations because I think at the moment it’s quite tokenistic”

“I know no one’s ever asked really, well, apart from now, ever asked my opinion on digital stuff.”

“it’s such a waste of time like no one listened like what was the point you were just brought in there to tick a box to say that they oh yeah they did ask”

“I feel like sometimes those like panels are very like curated”



The research heard concerns from some rangatahi that feel like they are underestimated or misunderstood. A number of young people talked about how adults can fail to see the necessity of being online, as well as the benefits, for young people, while acknowledging there are risks and challenges. This research heard from rangatahi who see this complexity and are actively navigating it, and they want to see this recognised.

“They’ll be like, oh, kids these days are so reliant on technology and it’s like, yeah, like I see where you’re coming from, but it’s not just like, oh, I want to see the latest trend or I want to watch the next video. It’s... It’s so much of the way that the world works now, like, um... Even like now I couldn’t survive without my phone, not because, I mean I would happily throw the thing in the rubbish bin if I was able to, but I have to use my banking app to pay my rent.”

“Honestly, they kind of need to trust our generation to know what we’re doing.”

“not everything about us being online is like bad. Like there’s features and stuff that can actually help you... a lot of the time off, at least with me, when I’m on social media, I’m just talking with my friend”



Rangatahi expressed a strong desire to have an authentic voice in decisions that affect them. The rangatahi strongly advocated for engagement of their opinions and input into the shaping of online spaces and the rules and management of them.

“I feel like giving more teenagers the opportunity to give what they think would help them be more safe online because I feel like I’ve heard a lot about social media trying to improve without any actual teenagers having an input”

“I think it’s, you know, the younger generation has been brought up in the online world and we see it different,”

“the experience of a 13 year old is vastly different to a 17 year old so both perspectives should be heard and valued”

“Every social media company needs a group of people between ages 16-30... young people don’t have enough say. Only after things come out or it there are big negative reactions”



In the research, rangatahi also showcased their capability and capacity to contribute to shaping a better digital future by sharing some of their ideas about ways that others (social media platforms, families, schools, government) might take action to improve things.

Access barriers are an area where rangatahi wanted to see action, with a desire for action by others to keep rangatahi connected.

On safety issues, rangatahi shared a strong desire to see things done to make online experiences safer and to help them navigate the trust and safety challenges of online experience today. The desire for action by platforms was often mentioned, with ideas including platforms improving safe-search tools and content management. There were concerns raised about platform design choices, which can make things worse rather than better. Location tracking aspects of some apps were particularly of concern to a number of rangatahi, due to physical safety concerns.

“From an education perspective, things worked well when schools supported students properly. Devices like Chromebooks were sent out, often with chargers and the necessary setup, and were delivered directly to students. This made learning more accessible and reduced stress for many.”

“I think we need way more publicly available good Wi-Fi”

“(platforms should be) stopping people from sending explicit or really, really messed up images”

“the amount of hours I had to go through them to try and find how to turn it off is like, they make, they kind of purposely make turn location off quite hard, I’ve noticed.”

“apps that have location features should just be gone full stop.”

The implementation of age-based social media bans was discussed often. While exploring the idea was of interest to some rangatahi, most raised strong concerns and criticisms of the approach and said they viewed blanket restrictions as an ineffective way of managing risks online. However, many rangatahi supported action being needed around the impact of potentially harmful content on vulnerable people, particularly tamariki and younger rangatahi.

“kids younger than five do not really need to be online, like do not need to see social media stuff”

“(I’d like to see) teen account settings, but if they were actually kind of like teen accounts that were a bit age restricted and kind of had more guidelines for some stuff, and then once you turn a certain age, like it would turn off, but just for when you’re still figuring out how to use social media and kind of being safe around that.”

“If you put in place a bunch of restrictions, a kid’s going to find out a way to access anything.”

“If you ban something, people are just going to get around it and then there’s nothing stopping anything and they probably don’t have those skills to be able to navigate that if they’ve just been fully banned.”

“Social media is just unsafe for young people, very, very young people, and most vulnerable people... I’d like banning it from like 70 upwards as well because they are well known to get scammed.”

“It’s way worse than if you, you’re like, Hey, this platform carries these risks and this is how you can manage it safely”

Research Reflections



Connection as necessary

This research provides an important perspective on digital inclusion work by emphasising that for many rangatahi digital connectivity is a necessity in day-to-day life - for education, employment, family, and social activities. The Internet is not something they have to be motivated to use, it is required.

Digital connectivity is also really important to rangatahi for how it enriches their lives in meaningful and specific ways, most importantly around human connection with family and friends across distance. It also delivers unique benefits for learning and exploring interests.

Rangatahi, however, shared experiences which reaffirm previous digital inclusion research and work. Having access to affordable and accessible digital devices as well as data and digital services is an ongoing challenge for many. It is a challenge which needs action urgently. The impacts of losing connectivity can have both immediate and lasting impacts for young people's lives.



The AI future creates uncertainty

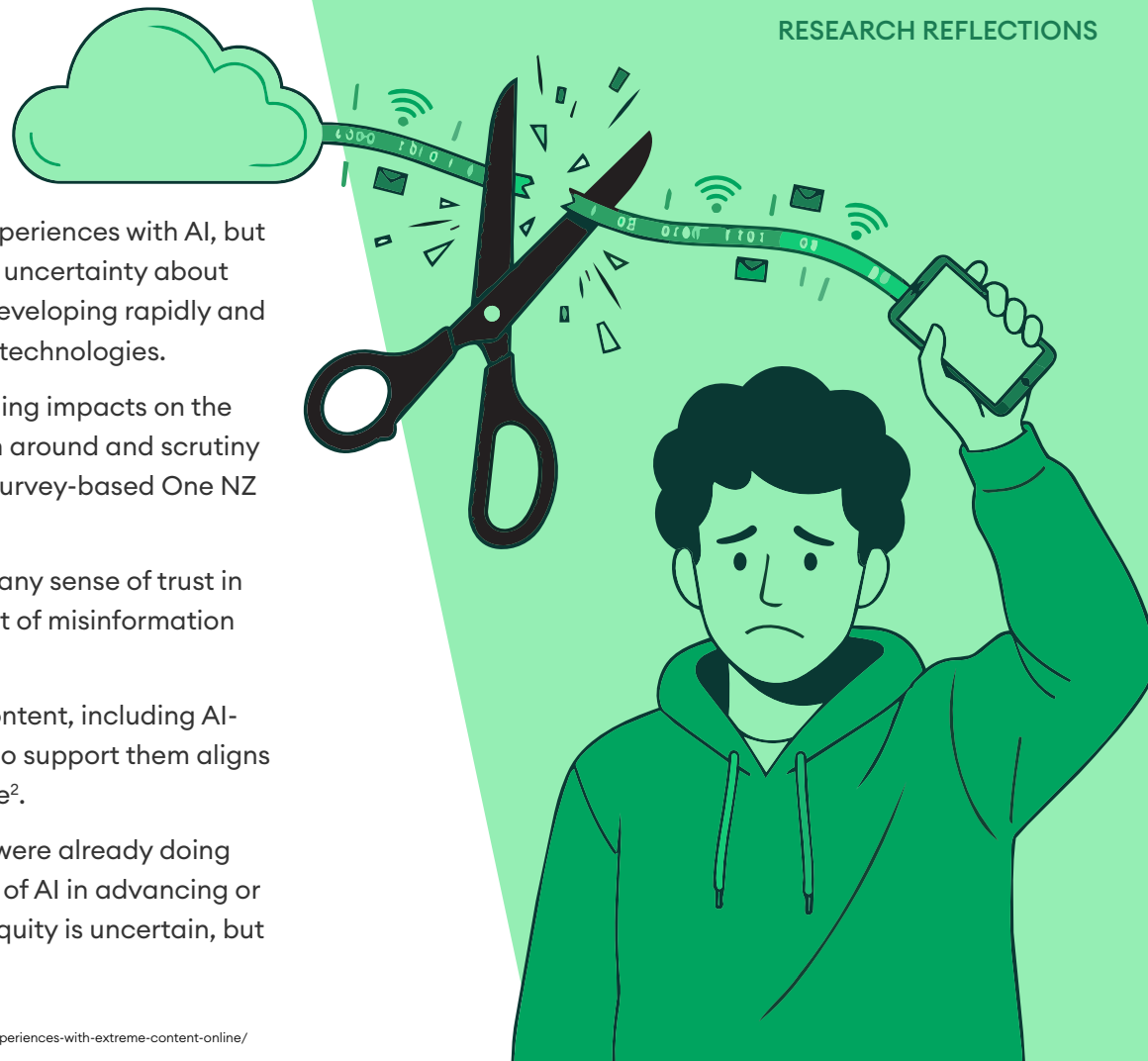
Rangatahi who participated in this research mentioned some positive experiences with AI, but rangatahi also spoke about personal experiences that reflected broader uncertainty about the impact of AI on society. Rangatahi understood the technology was developing rapidly and were already experiencing the impacts of social media and other digital technologies.

Their concerns were not just about themselves, but also for others, including impacts on the environment, the future of work and education and learning. This caution around and scrutiny of what an AI future should look like, echoes the findings in the national survey-based One NZ AI Trust Report 2026¹.

An overwhelming concern we heard about AI was that it further reduces any sense of trust in what you see online. Trust was already low because of the existing impact of misinformation and scams. Rangatahi were aware that constant vigilance was required.

Rangatahi also spoke about the impact of inappropriate and extreme content, including AI-generated content. This set of challenges for young people and those who support them aligns with research released last year by the New Zealand Classification Office².

Rangatahi were clear that they expected changes to be made and they were already doing what they could to navigate the environments created for them. The role of AI in advancing or undermining digital inclusion will require us to act. Its impact on digital equity is uncertain, but the future is in our hands.



¹ <https://media.one.nz/ai-trust-report-2026>
² <https://www.classificationoffice.govt.nz/news/news-items/content-that-crosses-the-line-new-report-highlights-young-peoples-experiences-with-extreme-content-online/>

Young people can help build a safer, fairer digital future

The rangatahi involved in this research expressed the desire, capability and capacity to be authentically involved in leadership and action around digital issues. The rich picture seen through this research of how rangatahi currently view and shape their digital experiences show their capacity to understand the complexities of digital challenges and to help shape solution-focused actions.

Young people must be recognised for, as well as supported to grow, the capability and capacity that they have as experts of their own online experiences, and they have lots of ideas around how to address challenges. This desire for involvement is consistent with the research by the Mana Mokopuna Children's Commissioner earlier this year around digital issues, and is aligned with youth-informed and youth-led approaches supported by the Digital Resilience Research Report 2025-2026 because "...many adult-designed approaches fail to resonate with the realities of young people's experiences of online spaces".



Rangatahi are solutions-focused

Another reflection from the research is that how we think about the barriers and problems could be important to how we address them; while it was common to talk about how social media or ‘the Internet’ cause challenges, in sharing stories about the issues, it was highlighted by some rangatahi that it’s important to remember it is **people** who do things online (bully, scam) or shape what’s happening (platform design or content creation) that cause the problems.

People are shaping our digital experiences, sometimes for worse, but people can also shape the digital future of Aotearoa New Zealand, together, to make it fairer and safer. This report offers actionable insights from rangatahi which can support digital inclusion work and help build a better digital future for us all.

“A lot of things are risk on the internet, but it’s not necessarily the internet... (it’s) people realising they have the power to manipulate other people’s realities.”



About this research

Understanding the design, approach, and collaborative partnerships behind the Rangatahi Digital Inclusion findings.



Purpose

Research on digital inclusion that is practical, accessible, and actionable, around supporting and empowering rangatahi and building a better-connected, digital Aotearoa

This report seeks to offer rich insights from rangatahi and partner organisations on digital inclusion and their digital experiences, alongside some recommendations on how rangatahi perspectives can help Aotearoa New Zealand build a safer, fairer digital future.



Scope

This research focused on researching with:

- young people (aged 16-24)
- kaimahi from youth focused partner organisations

Engagements with rangatahi were enabled by the following organisations, with insights added from the organisation as co-researchers. Thank you to:

Number 10

The Y South

VOYCE

Te Ara Tirama

Approach

Partnership: Te Rourou and One New Zealand collaborating with partner organisations and their kaimahi to engage rangatahi through existing relationships

Participatory: empowering the partner organisations and rangatahi as part of the research, alongside the researchers from Brainbox Institute and Te Rourou

Adaptable: Working with partner organisations, and supporting their engagement with rangatahi, with an ethical, iterative, and flexible approach to the research

Each of these organisations spoke with young people in ways that worked for the young people and the organisations. 28 rangatahi were engaged by the partner organisations as part of this research, including through 1:1 and group discussions, supported by semi-structured questions.

How we approached the research

This research was centred on existing relationships and the understanding that those who work with young people are best placed to have open and honest conversations with them, grounded in the trust they have already built.

Te Rourou had established relationships with the four participating youth organisations and invited them to be involved in exploring the digital experiences of rangatahi they work alongside.

This approach brought partner organisations into the research process itself, drawing on their knowledge and experience to help shape the conversations and interpret what was being heard from rangatahi. The Brainbox Institute collaborated as research partners, supporting research process design, analysis, and report preparation.

Shaping the questions together

The research began with a set of questions covering what Te Rourou and One New Zealand wanted to better understand about rangatahi experiences of digital access and online life. Before the wider research began, local partner organisations in Invercargill helped test and refine the questions.

Kaimahi discussed them with rangatahi and provided feedback on what worked and how the questions could be made clearer and more relevant. This feedback reshaped the questions, ensuring the research was informed by both the people leading the conversations and rangatahi themselves.



A shared framework, delivered flexibly

Participating organisations were provided with guidance and an agreed set of base questions but were encouraged to use them in ways that suited their rangatahi and context.

The research was intentionally conversational, allowing youth workers to adapt the way questions were explored. This resulted in different forms of engagement across organisations, while maintaining enough consistency to explore common questions.

The research was not designed to produce quantitative data. Instead, it prioritised a process that worked for rangatahi and the organisations supporting them.

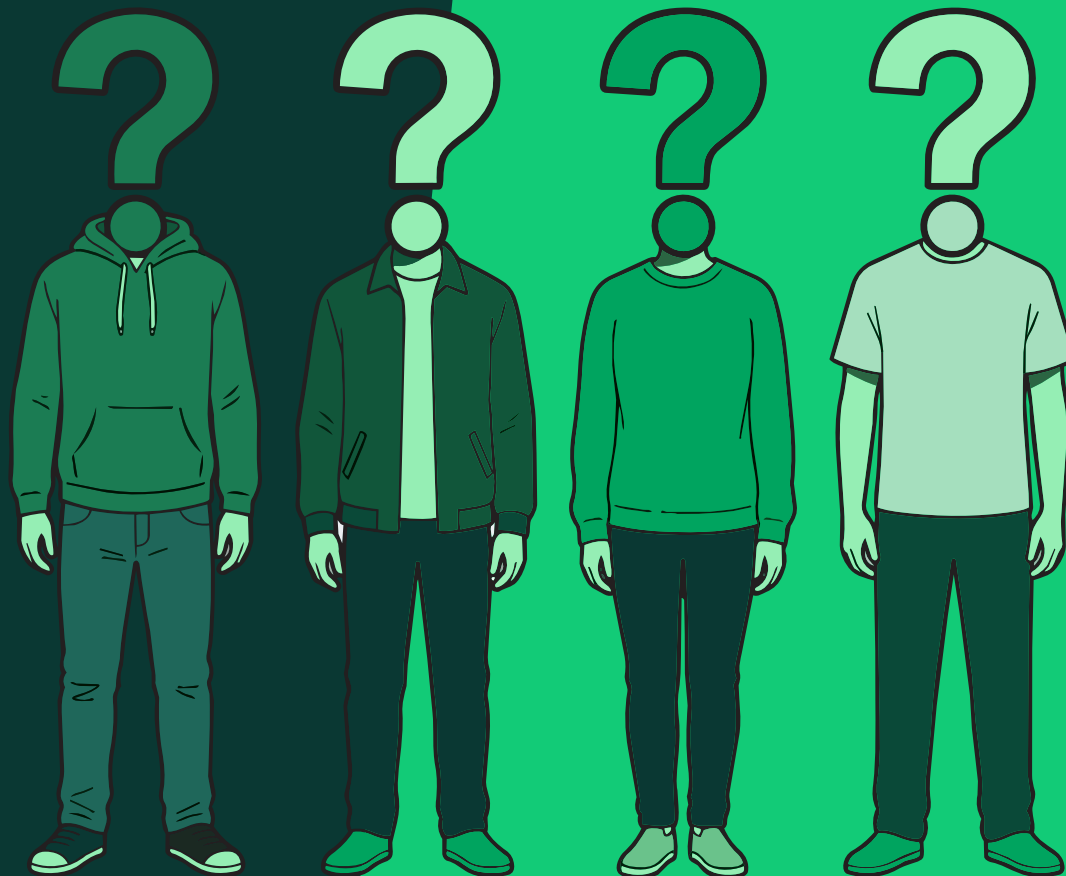


Anonymous participation

Rangatahi participation was anonymous. The research focused on their experiences and perspectives, allowing insights to be brought together across the research while protecting the identities of the young people who contributed.

Research input analysis

The research inputs shared from rangatahi and partner organisations were analysed for themes and insights, using text analysis software. The research insights and themes generated in this analysis were shared back with partner organisations and rangatahi for feedback, and this feedback and the inputs, together, inform this report and insights.



Looking overseas

The Australian Digital Child Summit Report 2025¹ recommends approaches like rights-based approaches, that can help ensure a focus on young people's agency and dignity, and co-design, which can be used to ensure that digital policies and resources reflect the lived realities of diverse young people.

The Asia Pacific Youth Internet Governance Forum initiative focuses on empowering young people aged 18 to 35 from around the Asia Pacific region as co-creators of digital policy rather than mere users.² In 2025 their **Declaration on Meaningful Youth Participation**³ call for intergenerational collaboration that treats youth not as the “next generation” but as partners of today; and sustained investment in youth-led research, policy development, and capacity building.



1

https://eprints.qut.edu.au/259936/1/Summit_Report.pdf

2

<https://yigf.asia/>

3

<https://netmission.asia/2025/11/04/yigf-asia-2025-declaration-on-meaningful-youth-participation/>

Ngā mihi

For more information about Te Rourou
and its mahi, please visit one.nz
