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EXPLORATORY STUDY ON GEN ALPHA IN ITALY, POLAND, AND ROMANIA

FORUM APULUM

AUTHORS
Delia Stănică, Doctoral Researcher in Sociology
Daniela Tarnovschi, PhD in Sociology

PROJECT COORDINATION
Ana Banu, Project Manager, Forum Apulum

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Introduction

How do children first encounter civic information when their primary social environment is made up of online platforms, not classrooms, television news or print media?

This report explores the question through research with children and adolescents aged 8–15 from Romania, Poland, and Italy. The research was conducted within the Youth Journalism for Sustainable Democracies project, a transnational initiative that addresses the need to engage young people in journalism, both as content creators and audience, as well as raise awareness about how to consume, produce and disseminate online content conscientiously.

Generation Alpha, born after 2010, is the first cohort to grow up entirely within algorithmic media ecosystems. For them, the internet is not just a source of information but a primary social environment structured by short-form video platforms, peer networks, and recommendation algorithms that shape how they make sense of the world.

Though distinct in their media cultures and political contexts, all three countries face the same fundamental question: how to nurture democratic engagement in a generation whose primary civic education space is algorithmically curated.

Each partner organization brings a distinct perspective to the overall project and each of their national reports:

Forum Apulum Association (Romania): A grassroots NGO building civic capacity through youth-led news platforms *(Gen, știri, Genzette)* reaching millions of young people monthly, and civic education programs *(Civicult)* training Romania's next generation of engaged citizens.

Association 61 (Poland): An independent, non-partisan organization monitoring Polish public life. Its project *Orientuj.się* is the largest political medium for Gen Z in Poland, translating complex developments into engaging short-form video.

Associazione Culturale Ubik Art (Italy): Brings decades of experience in visual storytelling and civic engagement through a "creactivist"

approach combining creative activism, comics, and graphic journalism to foster civic dialogue.

The report is meant to reach educators designing curricula, journalists reaching young audiences, platform designers shaping recommendation systems, and visual creators interested in social and civic issues. We invite you to read these pages not just as data but as a foundation for international collaboration which puts technological evolution and content creation in service of youth journalism, civic education and engagement.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YJ4SD | Studiu exploratoriu privind Generația Alpha în România

Executive Summary

Purpose of the study

This comparative study examines how children and adolescents aged 8–15 in Italy, Poland, and Romania, use digital media and how their digital habits relate to early forms of civic orientation. The report explores when and how young people value content perceived as "useful" or "important," and what factors increase the likelihood of civic engagement in a digital environment.

The objective is not to measure political participation, but to understand early indicators of public interest and socially relevant engagement within everyday digital practices.

Methodological framework

The quantitative component included 1,717 valid responses collected through an online questionnaire (CAWI): 1,249 from Poland, 257 from Romania, and 211 from Italy. The distribution reflects recruitment dynamics rather than a nationally representative sampling plan.

Because the samples are exploratory and cross-sectional, results describe internal patterns within the dataset and do not constitute national prevalence estimates. Statistical adjustments and modelling strategies were used to ensure analytical comparability across countries and age groups.[1] Because the Polish subsample was substantially larger than the Romanian and Italian samples, a weighting procedure was applied so that each country contributed approximately equally to the pooled analytical dataset.

Age was treated as a central analytical dimension, comparing children aged 8–11 and adolescents aged 12–15.

1 — The sample was weighted to correct for differences in sample size and to maintain balanced representation across the three countries.

Digital practices: a video-centered and peer-oriented ecosystem

Daily internet use among Generation Alpha is primarily relational and entertainment-oriented. The most common activities are chatting, gaming, listening to music, and watching videos. Educational uses are present but secondary.

Platform use is strongly centered on video and instant communication. YouTube, messaging applications, TikTok, and Instagram dominate daily routines. Gaming platforms play a key role among younger children, while adolescents increasingly shift toward socially networked platforms focused on identity and peer visibility.

Qualitative data confirm that content consumption is largely reactive and algorithm-driven. Children describe watching what appears in their feed rather than actively searching. Platforms structure attention, reduce decision-making effort, and integrate seamlessly into everyday life.

Developmental shift: the 12–15 threshold

A clear developmental transition appears around early adolescence. Interest in news and socially relevant content increases significantly between ages 8–11 and 12–15. Civic orientation is substantially higher among adolescents than among younger children.

However, when digital habits are taken into account, age alone becomes less decisive. The increase in civic engagement is largely explained by changes in digital orientation — especially stronger informational interest and greater digital literacy.

This suggests that differences between age groups are closely associated with changes in digital practices, particularly informational interest and digital literacy, rather than age alone.

What drives civic engagement?

The analysis identifies three key digital orientations:

- Informational orientation (interest in learning, news, explanations),

- Entertainment orientation (preference for dynamic and engaging formats),
- Digital literacy orientation (verification and critical evaluation practices).

The results are consistent:

- Informational interest is the strongest and most stable predictor of civic engagement.
- Digital literacy plays a positive but secondary role.
- Entertainment does not undermine civic engagement.

Young people who are active, curious, and information-oriented are significantly more likely to value socially relevant content. Critical skills reinforce engagement but do not replace genuine informational curiosity.

Digital user profiles

Cluster analysis reveals three distinct digital profiles within the exploratory sample:

- Active and Connected – strong informational interest and high digital activity.
- Critical and Selective – strong digital literacy but more moderate overall engagement.
- Low Involvement – low scores across informational interest, entertainment, and literacy.

Civic engagement is highest in the first group — the active and information-oriented users. It is lowest among those with low overall digital involvement.

This finding highlights that civic orientation grows primarily from informational curiosity combined with active participation in digital culture.

Strategic implications

For children aged 8–11, the priority is not direct civic activation but building curiosity through accessible and engaging formats. Informational interest is still developing and requires exposure and familiarization.

For adolescents aged 12–15, there is clear potential for civic engagement. However, format remains crucial. Socially relevant content must be integrated into dynamic, platform-native forms rather than positioned in opposition to entertainment.

Segmentation by age and digital profile is more strategically meaningful than segmentation by country alone.

Conclusion

Civic engagement among Generation Alpha appears strongly linked to informational curiosity, supported by digital literacy, and active participation in digital environments.

The findings describe robust internal patterns within exploratory samples and provide a structured framework for understanding digital civic orientation. They should not be interpreted as nationally representative estimates but as analytically grounded insights that can inform future research and content strategy.

METHODOLOGY

YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

Methodology

Research objective

This study explores how Generation Alpha's digital experiences are connected to the way they understand information, public life, and European values. It focuses on children and early adolescents aged 8 to 15 and looks at how their everyday online activities relate to the way they form opinions, build identities, and begin to understand society.

The research starts from a simple idea: for Generation Alpha, the digital world is not separate from "real life." It is part of their daily routine. Platforms, short videos, influencers, algorithm-based feeds, and AI tools are all part of how young people learn, communicate, and make sense of the world. For this reason, the study does not look at media use in isolation. Instead, it places digital habits within a broader context that includes family influence, school environment, peer relationships, and emerging civic awareness.[2]

The analysis covers several connected areas. First, digital practices: which platforms children use, how much time they spend online (on weekdays and weekends), what types of content they prefer, whether they follow influencers, and whether they use AI tools. Second, how they approach information: where they get news or explanations, how much they trust different sources, whether they encounter misinformation, and how they check information. Third, early civic development: how they understand democracy and institutions, what fairness and equality mean to them, and whether they feel they have a voice or influence.

Rather than treating these topics separately, the study looks at how they are connected. Beyond describing patterns, the study also has a strategic purpose. It includes a segmentation analysis aimed at identifying different types of digital audience profiles.[3] These profiles can

2 — Digital practices are analysed within a multi-level framework that includes family mediation, school context, and peer dynamics, rather than as isolated behavioural variables.

3 — Cluster or profile-based analyses are used to identify distinct digital orientation types for strategic application

help inform youth-focused content strategies that are both relevant and capable of encouraging active engagement with public information.

Research design

The study is based on a mixed-method research design combining a quantitative cross-sectional survey with a qualitative component consisting of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. This design was chosen deliberately in order to capture both measurable patterns of digital behaviour and the meanings that children and adolescents attribute to their digital experiences, civic attitudes, and social realities.

The comparative report builds on the analysis of research results collected in three countries — Romania, Poland, and Italy — integrating the findings of the national reports into a shared analytical framework, and early forms of civic engagement among children and adolescents.

Qualitative component

The qualitative component was designed to deepen the understanding of mechanisms that cannot be fully captured through survey responses alone. It focused on how young people interpret information, negotiate meanings within peer groups, describe their relationship to institutions, and articulate their sense of agency and belonging.

Two qualitative methods were used: focus group discussions (FGI) and semi-structured / in-depth interviews (IDI). A shared discussion guide was developed to ensure thematic coherence across countries, while allowing moderators flexibility to follow emerging themes.

Focus groups were conducted face-to-face and were structured to capture collective processes of opinion formation, peer negotiation, and social positioning. This format allowed observation of how children and adolescents discuss topics such as fairness, democracy, influence, misinformation, and digital habits in interaction with peers. The group setting was particularly valuable for identifying dominant narratives, shared frames, and the influence of social dynamics on expressed attitudes.

In-depth interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on context. These interviews enabled a more reflective and individual exploration of digital autonomy, trust, perceived risks, experiences with misinformation, and emerging civic awareness. The individual format provided space for participants to articulate ambivalences, uncertainties, or personal experiences that might not surface in a group setting.

Country-specific implementation varied as follows:

- In Poland, eight focus groups were organised in four purposely selected schools representing different locality types (large urban, medium town, small town, rural). Participants were aged approximately 7–15. In addition, eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with students born between 2009 and 2013.
- In Romania, five focus groups were conducted with children, structured by age and area of residence (urban/rural), and one additional focus group was conducted with parents. The parental group provided insight into mediation practices, perceptions of digital risk, and expectations regarding civic education.
- In Italy, eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted (twelve individual and six group interviews). The qualitative sample also included three adult key informants—teachers from different educational levels—who provided professional perspectives on digital engagement and observed transformations in civic and informational behaviour among students.

Quantitative component (CAWI)

The quantitative component of the study consisted of an anonymous, self-administered online questionnaire (CAWI) addressed to children and adolescents aged 8–15. The survey was implemented in Romania, Poland, and Italy using a shared master questionnaire. This ensured

conceptual comparability across countries, while allowing minor linguistic and contextual adaptations.

The questionnaire covered three main areas: digital practices (platforms used, time spent online during weekdays and weekends, types of content consumed, influencer following, and use of AI tools), approaches to information (sources, trust levels, exposure to misinformation, and verification practices), and indicators of digital autonomy (such as smartphone ownership and parental mediation in selected contexts). Most behavioural questions were structured as multiple-response items, with each option coded as a separate binary variable (0 = not selected, 1 = selected). This structure allowed a detailed mapping of digital behaviours but required later aggregation into composite indices for explanatory modelling (see Section 1.4).

Survey distribution relied primarily on school networks and snowball dissemination. In some contexts, recruitment was supported by communication campaigns targeting parents via social media. The final dataset includes 1,717 valid responses: 1,249 from Poland (72.7%), 257 from Romania (15.0%), and 211 from Italy (12.3%). This uneven distribution reflects actual recruitment dynamics rather than a nationally balanced sampling plan.

Because Poland represents nearly three quarters of the sample, simple pooled averages would largely reflect Polish patterns. For this reason, aggregated results should be interpreted as exploratory comparisons shaped by the existing sample sizes, not as balanced three-country estimates.

To address this imbalance analytically, two strategies were used. First, sample weighting was introduced in pooled analyses so that each country contributed more proportionally to the overall estimates. The weighting procedure reduces the dominance of the largest sample and helps mitigate cross-country bias in comparative statistics. However, this adjustment is intended only to improve analytical balance and comparability; it does not make the data nationally representative and does not eliminate sampling bias.

The design is cross-sectional, meaning that data were collected at a single point in time. The study therefore provides a structured snapshot

of digital practices and civic engagement patterns, but it does not allow causal claims or longitudinal analysis of developmental change.

Age was treated as a central analytical dimension, comparing children aged 8–11 with adolescents aged 12–15. This distinction reflects a meaningful developmental transition into early adolescence. Because age structure may vary across countries, statistical models include both age and country to distinguish developmental effects from contextual ones.

Not all questionnaire items were identical across the three countries. Variables available only in certain national datasets were analysed within the relevant subsamples, and conclusions were limited accordingly. Overall, the quantitative data provide a coherent basis for analysing relationships between digital orientations and civic engagement within exploratory samples, while maintaining explicit caution regarding national generalisation.

Operationalisation of concepts and justification of analytical decisions

The main goal of this study is not only to describe how children use the internet, but to understand when and why they become interested in socially relevant content. To answer this question, the research required a clear and measurable outcome variable.

For Generation Alpha, the most visible sign that something matters is interaction: liking, sharing, or commenting. These actions signal attention and perceived importance. The questionnaire therefore included an item measuring whether respondents would interact with content they consider “useful” or “important.” Based on this, a Civic Engagement variable was constructed.

This measure does not capture formal political activity. It captures an early, age-appropriate form of civic openness — willingness to engage with meaningful content in digital spaces. Civic Engagement was created because the study needed a measurable and age-appropriate way to capture early forms of public interest in a digital context.

To understand what influences this engagement, related online behaviours were grouped into three broader orientations:

- Informational orientation (using the internet for learning, searching, understanding, news/explanations),
- Entertainment orientation (using it mainly for fun and attractive content, recreational, short-form, humorous/attractive content preferences),
- Media literacy orientation (checking information and verifying credibility, self-reported verification and credibility-checking practices).

These behaviours were combined into indices and standardised so that their effects could be compared clearly in statistical models. Logistic regression was then used to estimate how these orientations — together with age, gender, and country — affect the probability of civic engagement.

Methodological limitations

The findings of the research must be interpreted within exploratory limits:

- Non-representative samples: recruitment was convenience-based; results are not national prevalence estimates. Weighting supports comparability, not representativeness.
- Cross-sectional design: associations can be identified, but causal direction cannot be established.
- Self-report measures: responses may reflect interpretation differences, recall issues, or social desirability; concepts like “news” or “important” may be understood differently by age.
- Indices are study-specific constructs: they are coherent analytical measures, but not internationally standardised psychometric scales.
- Cross-country constraints: some items are not fully comparable across countries; qualitative scope differs by context.

- Clusters are descriptive: cluster shares describe patterns within this dataset and should not be treated as population segments.

Overall, results should be read as robust internal patterns in exploratory data, useful for strategy and for guiding future representative research.

Ethics and child protection

The study followed standard ethical requirements for research with minors: voluntary participation, informed consent (parents/guardians and participants), the right to withdraw, anonymisation, and secure data handling. Tools were adapted to participants' age. In Italy, institutional constraints affected recruitment. Research and translation were assisted by AI-powered chatbots.[4]

Data integration and analytical approach

Quantitative data from the three countries were consolidated into a shared database to allow unified and comparative analysis. Survey results were interpreted together with focus group and interview evidence through triangulation, using qualitative insights to clarify mechanisms behind quantitative patterns. intensity of internet use: weekdays, weekends, and digital exposure.

4 — All factual information and analytical interpretations were verified through primary sources by Daniela Tarnovschi and Delia Stănică.

THE SOCIO-DIGITAL UNIVERSE OF GENERATION ALPHA

YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

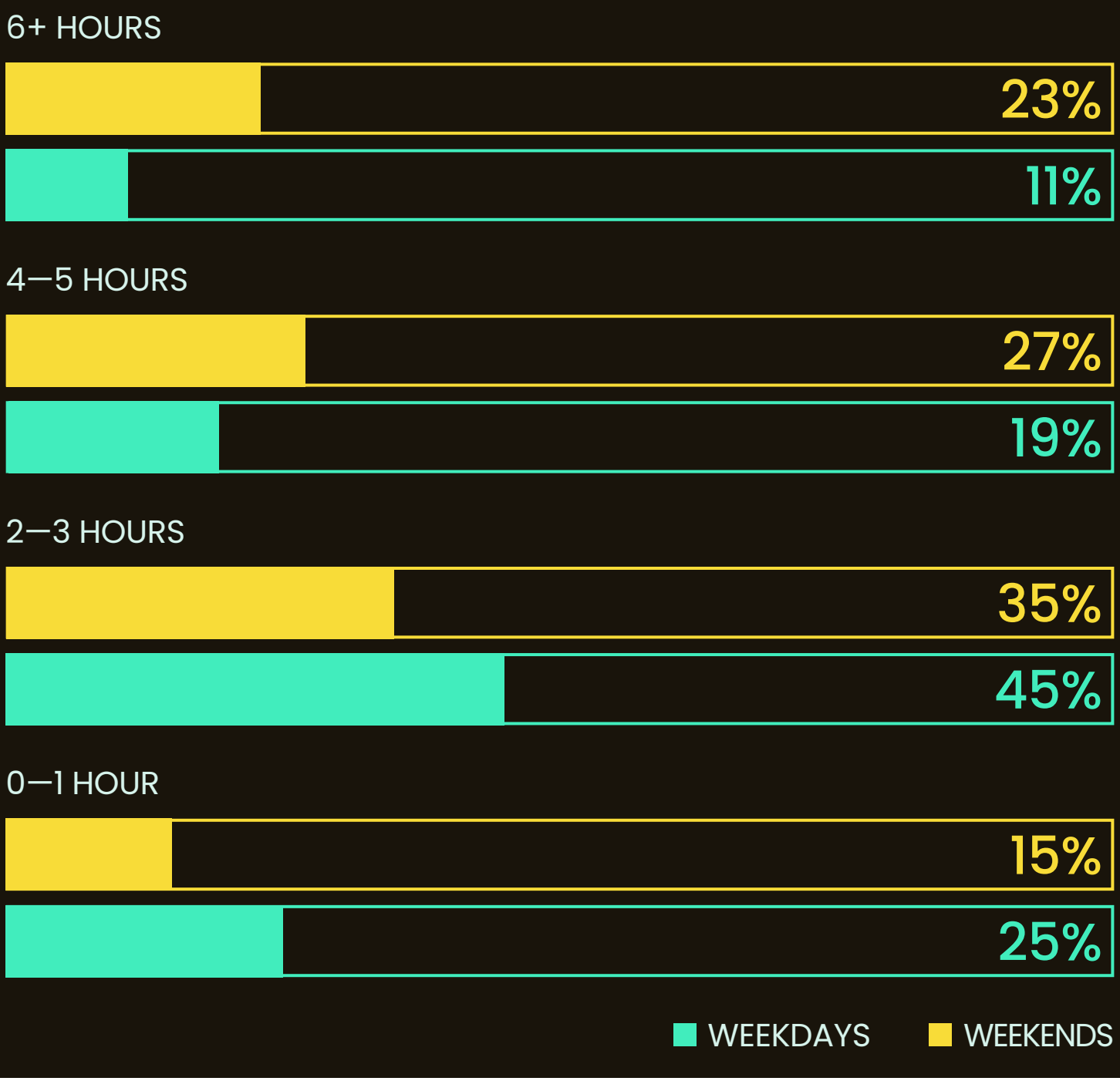
The socio-digital universe of generation alpha

Intensity of internet use: weekdays, weekends, and digital exposure

The relationship between children and adolescents and informational content cannot be separated from the level and structure of their online exposure.

During weekdays (Monday–Friday), the dominant category is 2–3 hours per day, representing approximately 45% of valid respondents. Around 19% report spending 4–5 hours daily online, while nearly 11% indicate 6 hours or more. Only about one quarter of respondents fall into the 0–1 hour category (Graph 1). This distribution suggests moderate to high levels of digital engagement even on school days.

GRAPH 1.
The use of internet during the weekdays and weekends



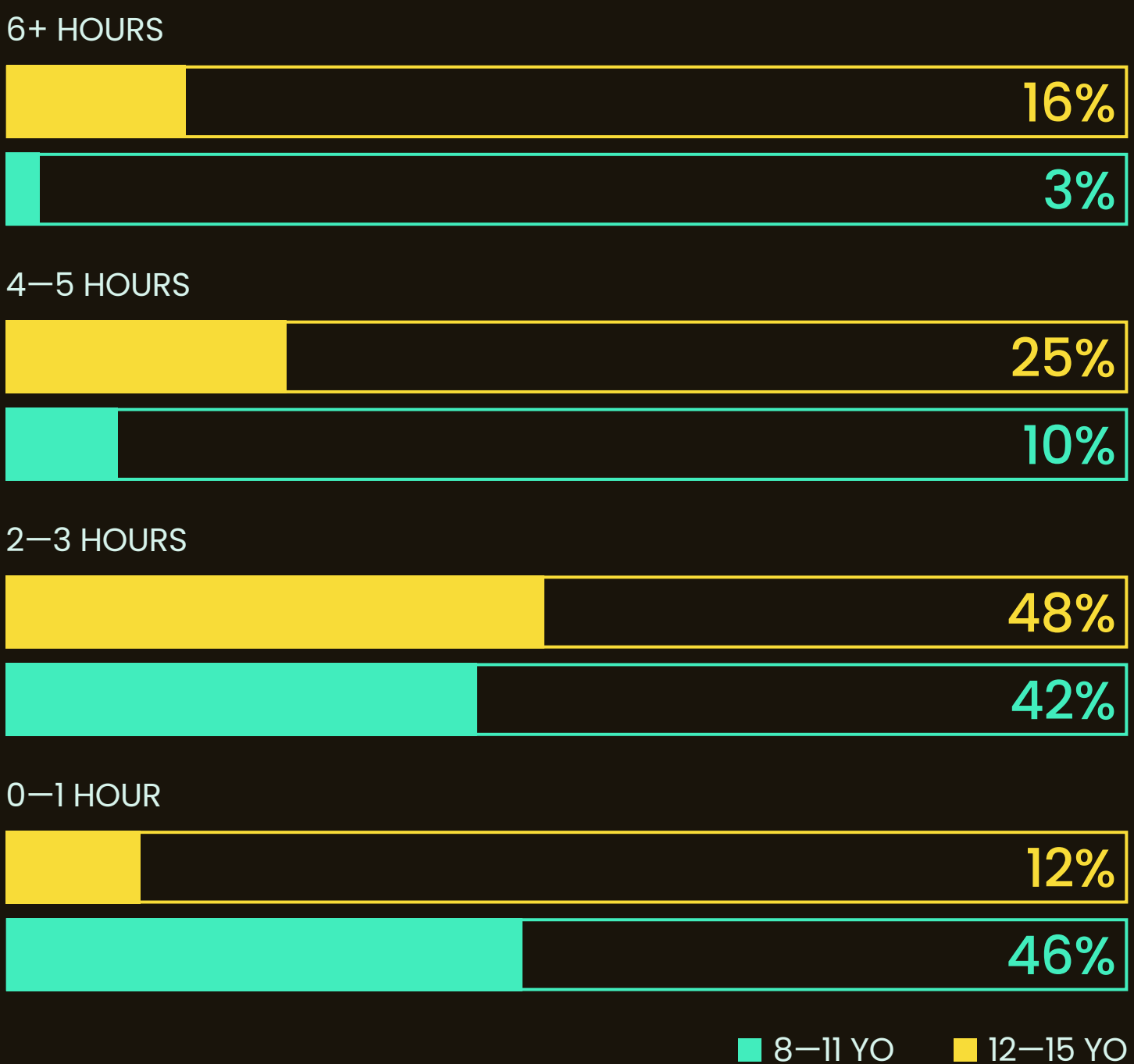
On weekends, the structure shifts visibly. The 6+ hours category nearly doubles compared to weekdays, reaching approximately 23%. The 4–5 hours category increases to over 27%, while the 0–1 hour category drops below 16% (Graph 2). This pattern indicates a clear intensification of digital exposure during periods of increased discretionary time. For most respondents, the online environment represents a continuous and significant presence in daily life. From a strategic perspective, this

means that content strategies address not an occasional audience, but one exposed systematically and repeatedly to digital stimuli. The data clearly indicate that the internet is not a marginal space in their lives, but a stable and routinized everyday infrastructure.

Across both weekdays and weekends, age differences are pronounced within the analysed samples. Lower time categories (0–1 hours) are predominantly associated with younger children (8–11 years), whereas higher time categories (4–5 hours and especially 6+ hours) are largely concentrated among adolescents (12–15 years) (Graph 3).

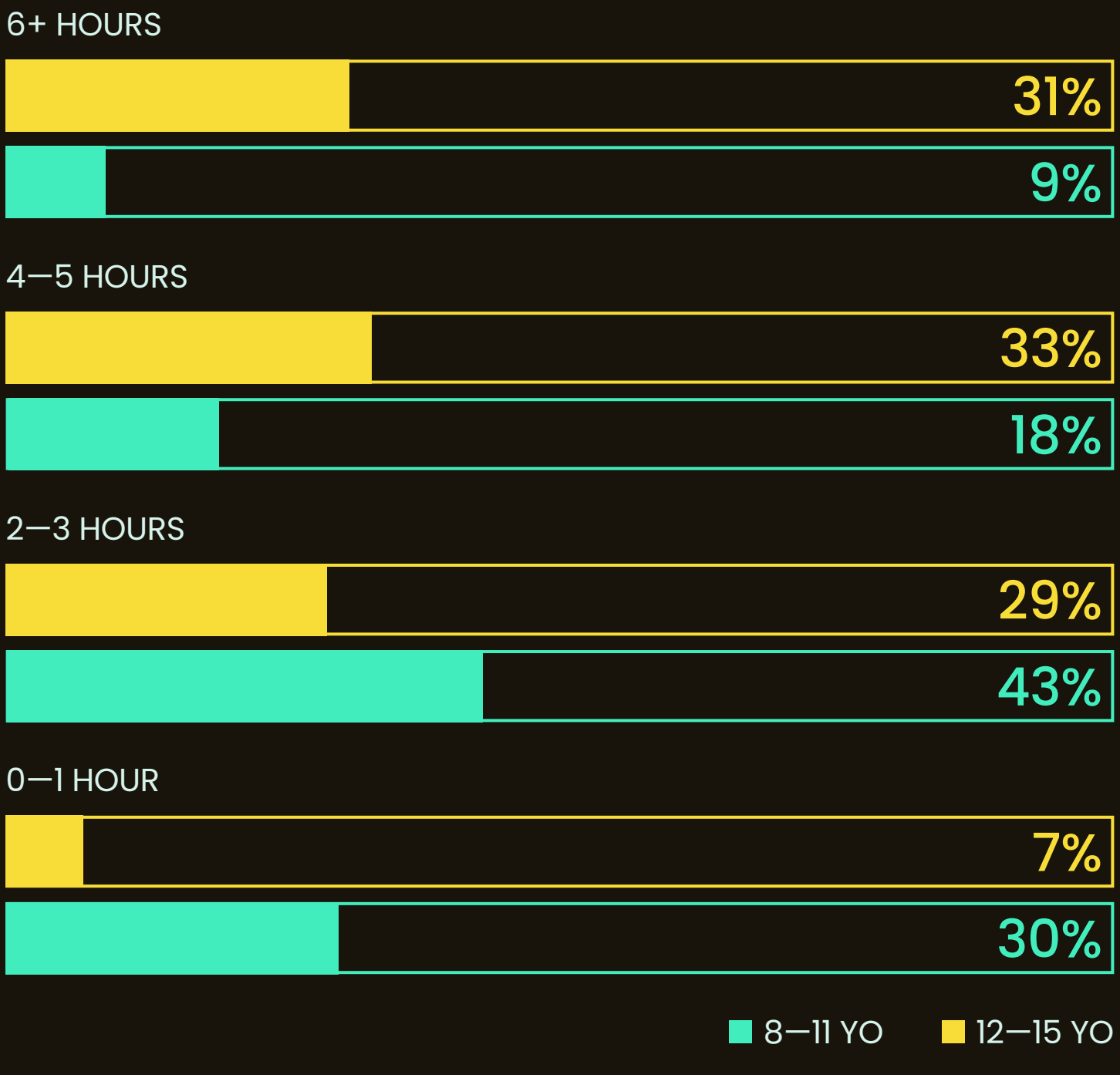
GRAPH 2.

The use of internet during the weekdays / by age groups



GRAPH 3.

The use of internet during the weekends / by age groups



The gradient becomes even more pronounced during weekends. In the 6+ hours category, more than 85% of respondents are aged 12–15, suggesting that intensive digital use is primarily characteristic of early adolescence rather than middle childhood. This age-related gradient reflects increasing autonomy, social connectivity, and platform centrality in adolescent life.

Qualitative findings help contextualise the quantitative patterns. Daily life is described as structured around school obligations, with online time functioning as relaxation and routine rather than as an exceptional activity. As one participant noted: **All of us have studying and homework after school, but let's be honest, most of us spend most of our time on the internet anyway.** *Poland, FGI, high school, medium-sized city*. Even younger children describe this alternation simply: **I either like playing on the PlayStation or sleeping.** *Poland, FGI, Year 2, large city.* Similarly, a Romanian respondent states: **I sleep, eat and then look at my phone or laptop.** *Romania, FGI, rural, 12–14 years old*. These accounts suggest that connectivity is integrated into everyday normality.

Content circulates within peer groups and becomes material for offline interaction. Italian participants describe this continuity clearly: **With my classmates we all watch the same things on the internet. I talk to them a lot about what we see online.** *Italy, semi-structured interview.* Digital experiences therefore extend into school life, reinforcing group cohesion.

Differences between weekdays and weekends are perceived mainly as differences in rhythm rather than in type of content. Weekdays are more constrained by school responsibilities, while weekends allow more extended use: **During the week, I do my homework and just sit on my phone.** *Romania, FGI, Bucharest, 11–13 years old.*

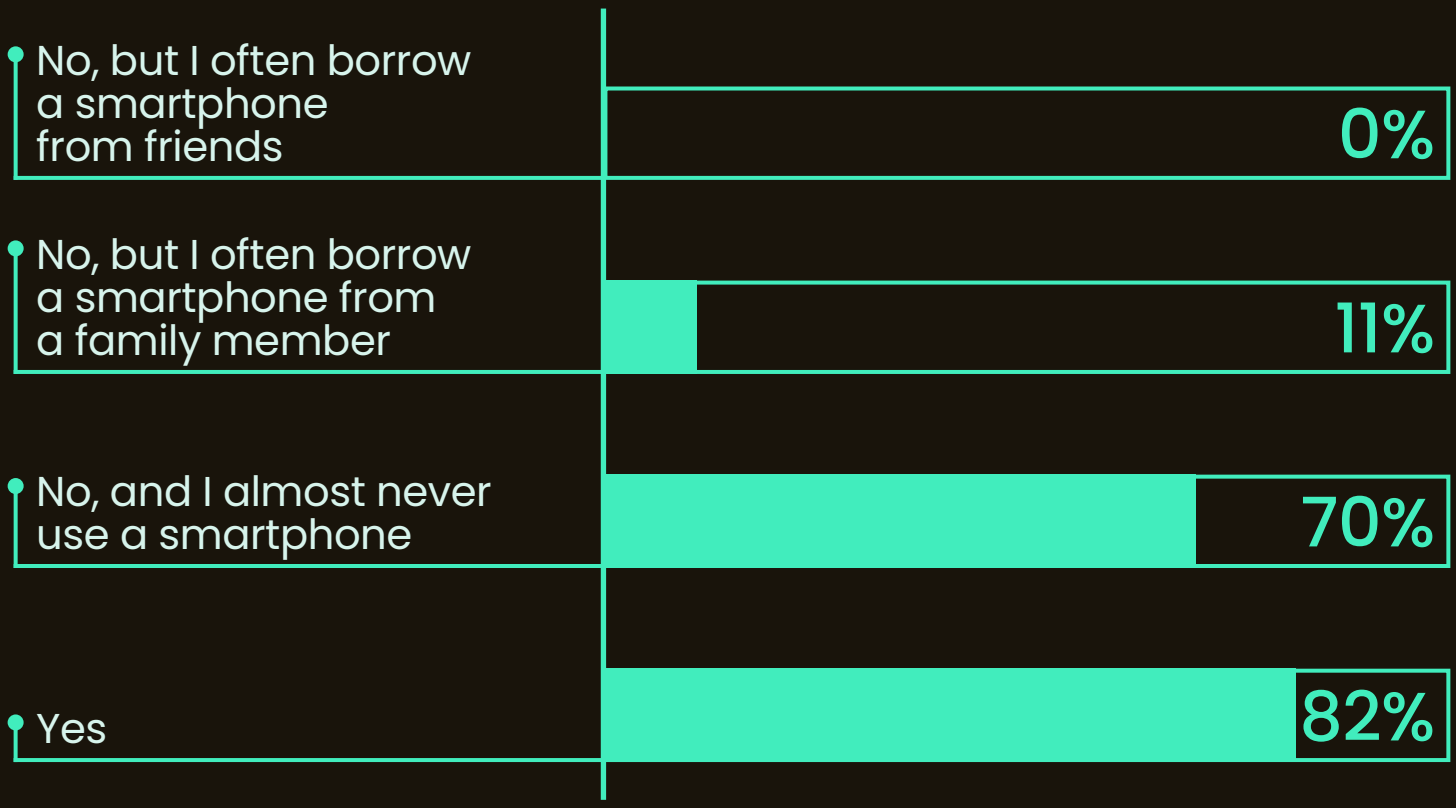
Overall, across countries, digital practices appear normalised, intensify with age, and are closely linked to peer socialisation.

Digital autonomy

Digital autonomy represents a structural dimension of the socio-digital ecosystem and constitutes an essential background variable for understanding subsequent patterns of civic engagement. Access to devices, parental mediation, and degrees of regulatory control shape not only intensity of use but also the scope of exploration and the conditions under which digital practices unfold.

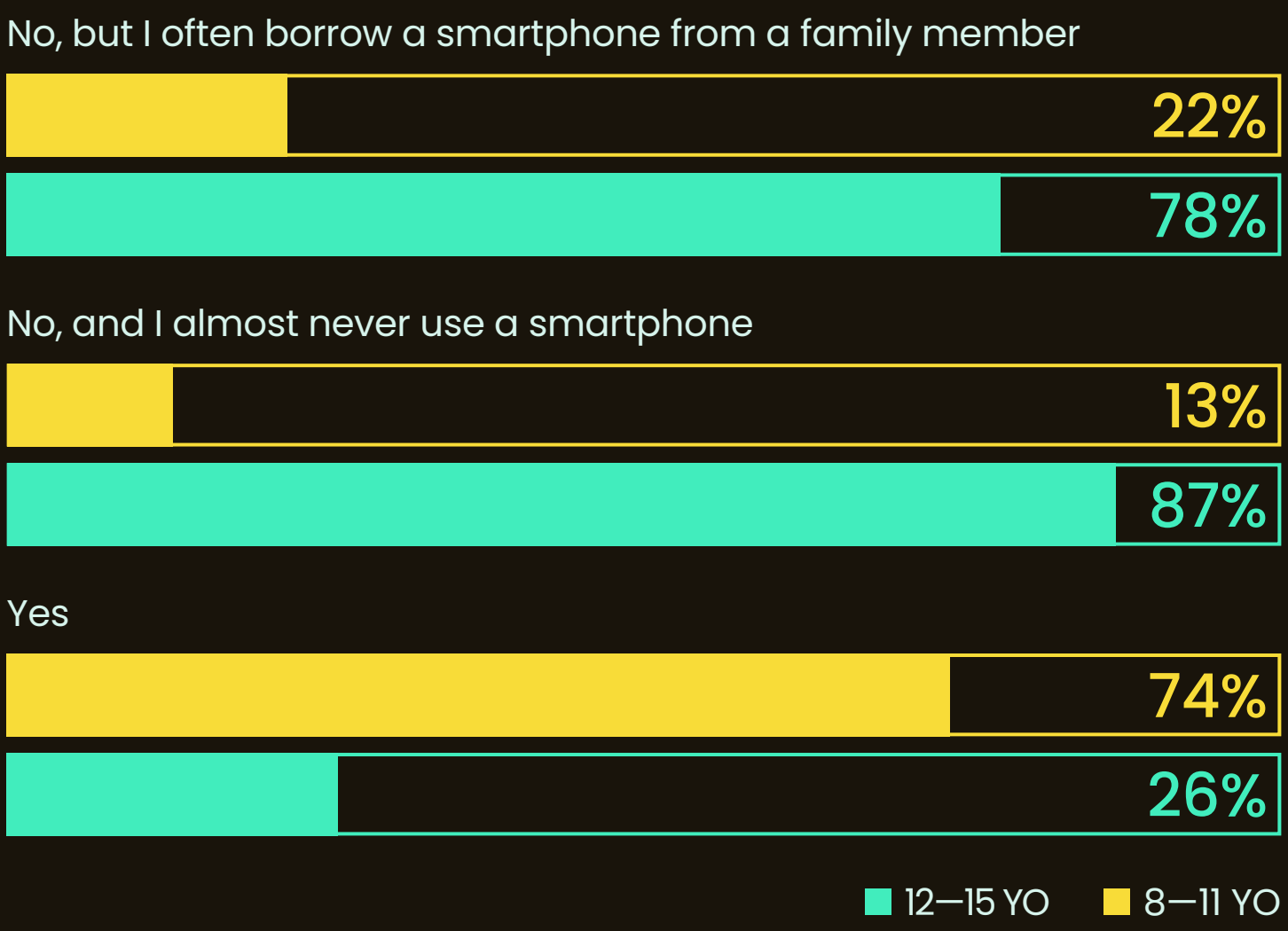
Most children in the analysed samples already have a high level of digital autonomy. Over 82% report owning a personal smartphone. Only 7% say they almost never use one, while around 11% rely mainly on a shared or borrowed device from a family member (Graph 4). In practical terms, having direct and individual access to a smartphone is now the norm rather than the exception.

GRAPH 4.
The access to smartphones



Age makes the biggest difference. The relationship between age and smartphone ownership is strong, showing a clear shift between the 8–11 and 12–15 age groups (Graph 5). Younger children are much more likely to use a shared device or to have limited access, while adolescents overwhelmingly report owning their own phone. This transition — usually around the move from primary to lower secondary school — marks an important step toward digital independence.

GRAPH 5.
The access to smartphones / by age groups



This also helps explain why older children spend more time online. It is not just about preference or interest. Having a personal device means constant access. It allows ongoing communication with peers, flexible browsing, and quick, repeated interactions throughout the day. In this sense, smartphone ownership creates the conditions for more intense and continuous digital engagement.

Differences between urban and rural areas exist, but they are relatively small. While statistically significant, the effect is modest, suggesting that access to smartphones is fairly widespread across residential settings. The basic device gap between rural and urban children appears limited in this sample.

Overall, smartphone ownership should not be seen simply as a consumer choice. It represents a key step in children's digital lives. Gaining

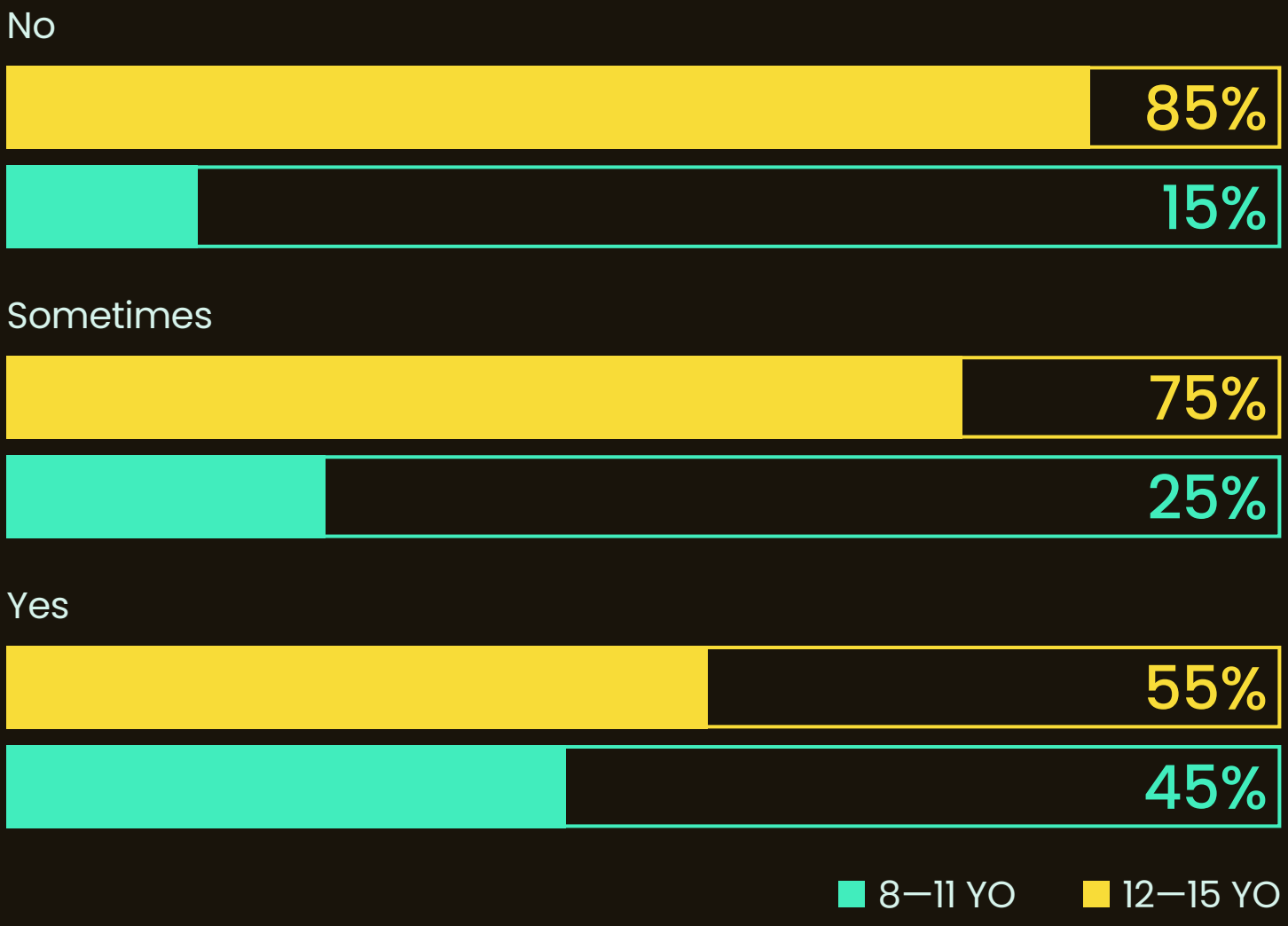
a personal device changes how young people access information, interact with peers, and participate in online spaces. Understanding this transition is essential for designing effective digital education, parental guidance strategies, and youth-focused policies.

Autonomy, however, is not unconditional. Analysis of the Romania–Italy subsample concerning parental consent for downloading or installing applications reveals statistically significant differences between the 8–11 and 12–15 age groups.[5]

In the 8–11 group, the dominant response is **Yes, always,** indicating strong parental control over application installation. In the 12–15 group, the proportion of **No** responses increases substantially, suggesting a progressive reduction of direct parental oversight (Graph 6). The effect size is moderate, pointing to a clear developmental transition in regulatory control as age increases.

5 — $p < .001$

GRAPH 6.
Parental control / by age group



This transition is analytically important. It reflects not merely increasing technological competence, but a shift in the structure of authority and trust. Control evolves from direct supervision toward negotiated autonomy. The data suggest a gradual recalibration of boundaries rather than abrupt withdrawal of regulation.

Parents' narratives confirm that digital autonomy coexists with ongoing supervision. Regulation is described less as strict prohibition and more as daily negotiation, often centred on time limits and the distinction between school days and weekends: **During the week, he is allowed three hours of internet. On weekends, conflicts frequently arise because he doesn't want to leave the computer and says he doesn't know what else to do.** *Romania, FG Parents*

Tension appears especially at the moment of interruption, when imposed limits clash with the immersive logic of platforms and games: **He is fascinated by games and, when he is there, it is very difficult to get him out. You have to shout several times for him to hear you.** *Romania, FG Parents.* In response, some parents rely on technological monitoring tools: **We have Family Link and we keep a close eye on what he's doing.** *Romania, FG Parents.*

At the same time, a generational gap in communication is visible. Online experiences are widely shared among peers but less frequently discussed at home: **I never talk to my parents about what I see online. They don't ask me questions. I don't feel the need to share it with them.** *Italy, interview.* This suggests a form of symbolic autonomy of the digital space.

Overall, the data indicate a negotiated model of regulation. Digital autonomy expands with age, but parental supervision adapts rather than disappears, shifting from restricting access to managing use and balancing exploration with protection.

Digital practices and functions of the internet

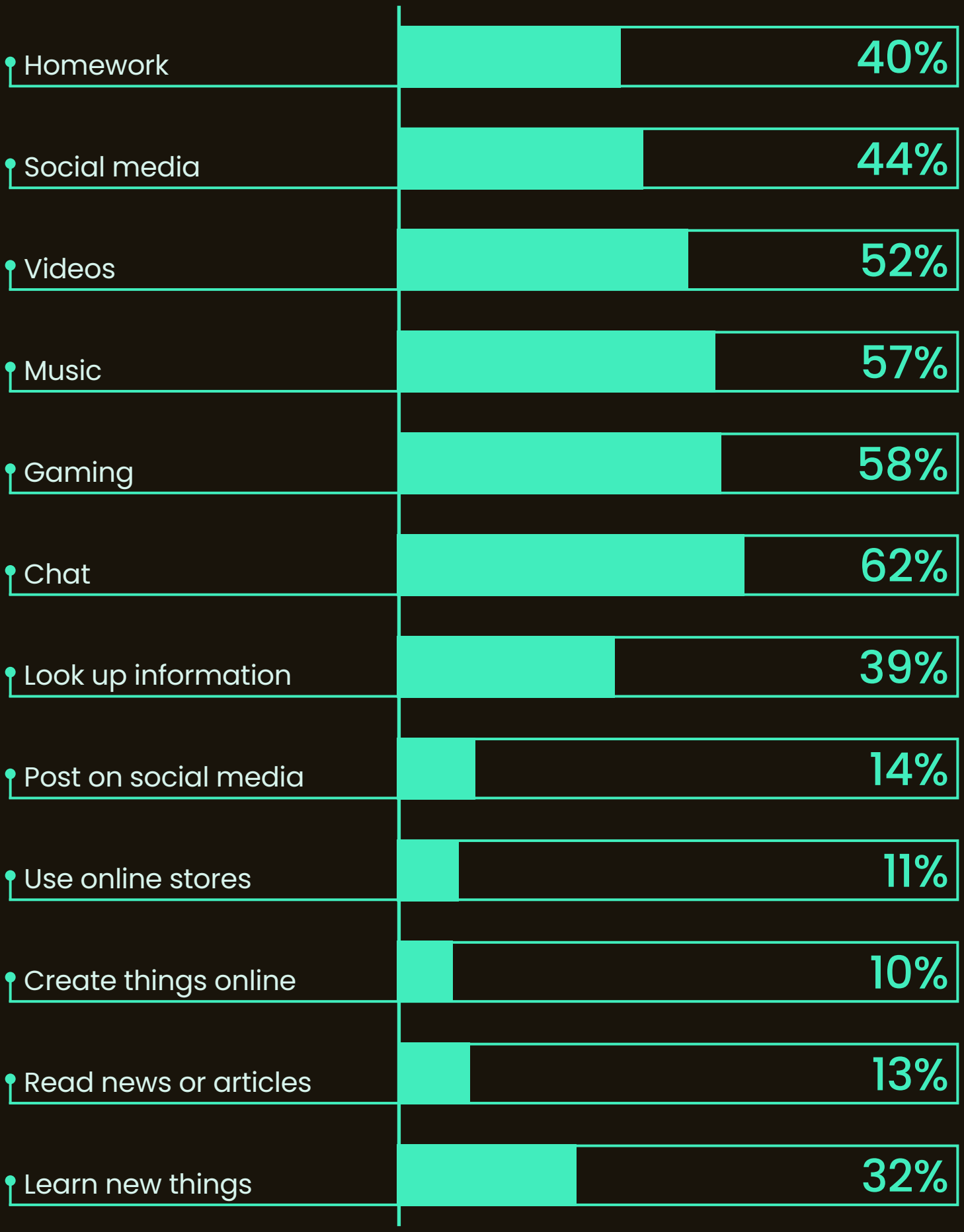
The data show that daily internet use among children and adolescents is mainly focused on communication and entertainment.

The most common daily activities are chatting with others (62%), playing online games (58%), listening to music (57%), and watching videos or series (52%). Social media use is also frequent (44%), but active posting is much less common (14%).

Educational use exists, but it is not dominant. Around 40% use the internet for homework, 39% search for information about hobbies or interests, and 32% say they learn new things online (Graph 7). Reading news (13%) and creating content (10%) are less frequent activities. Since respondents could select multiple activities, percentages do not sum to 100%. Overall, the internet functions mainly as a space for social interaction, leisure, and everyday communication rather than as a primary source of sustained information-seeking.

GRAPH 7.

Top daily activities on internet (multiple response question)[6]



6 — respondents could select multiple activities, percentages do not sum to 100%.

The qualitative data confirm this pattern. Most children describe watching, scrolling, and reacting to content rather than producing it publicly. As one participant put it simply: **I watch videos.** *Romania, FG Bucharest, 11–13 years old*

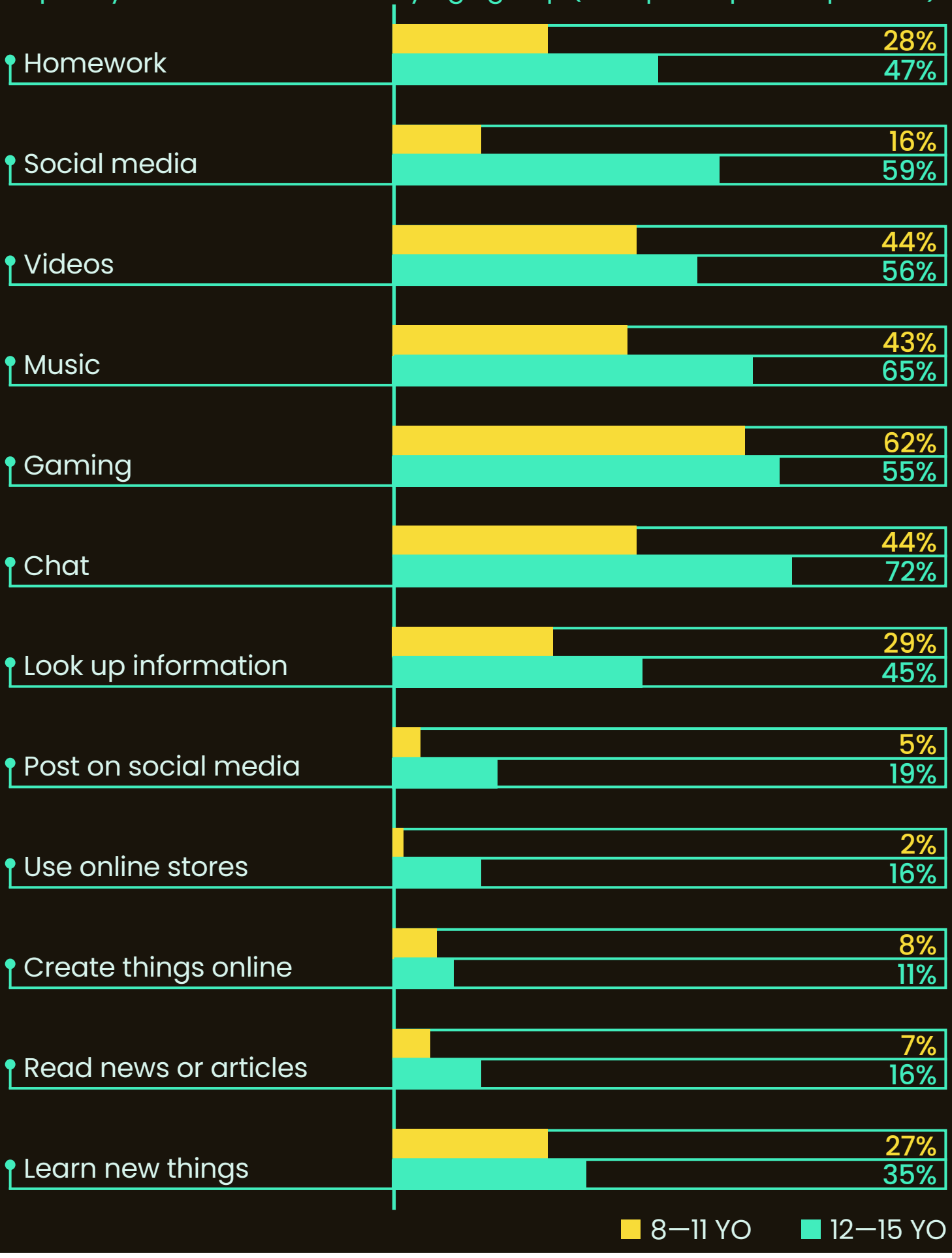
Video consumption clearly dominates. Content is often selected by algorithms rather than active searching. Participants explained: **Things I like appear in my feed.** *FG Bucharest, 11–13 years* **The YouTube algorithm is very well developed...** *FG Bucharest, 13–14 years*.

At younger ages, some children experiment with posting, especially on TikTok. However, visibility is often negotiated within the family. A parent described this dynamic: **In the past few days, my child told me that he also wants TikTok because a friend makes funny videos there. I told him no.** *Romania, FGI, parent*

With age, content creation becomes more selective and often limited to smaller peer circles. Age differences are clear. Younger children (8–11) are more focused on gaming and video platforms. Adolescents (12–15) are more active on social media, more likely to post, and more interested in searching for information related to personal interests (Graph 8). Digital behavior becomes more socially visible and more autonomous with age.

GRAPH 8.

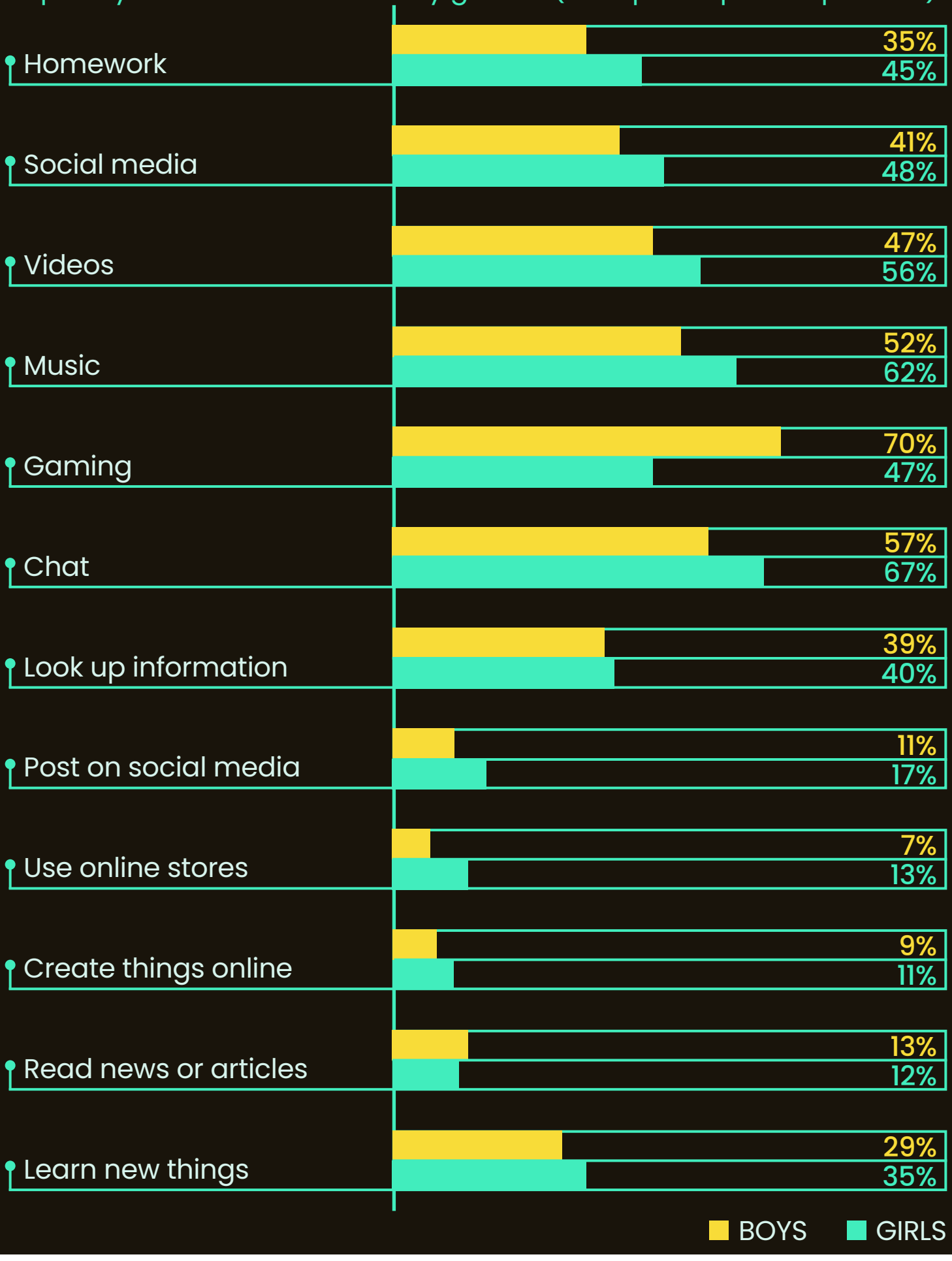
Top daily activities on internet by age group (multiple response question)[7]



7 — idem

GRAPH 9.

Top daily activities on internet by gender (multiple response question)[8]



8 — idem

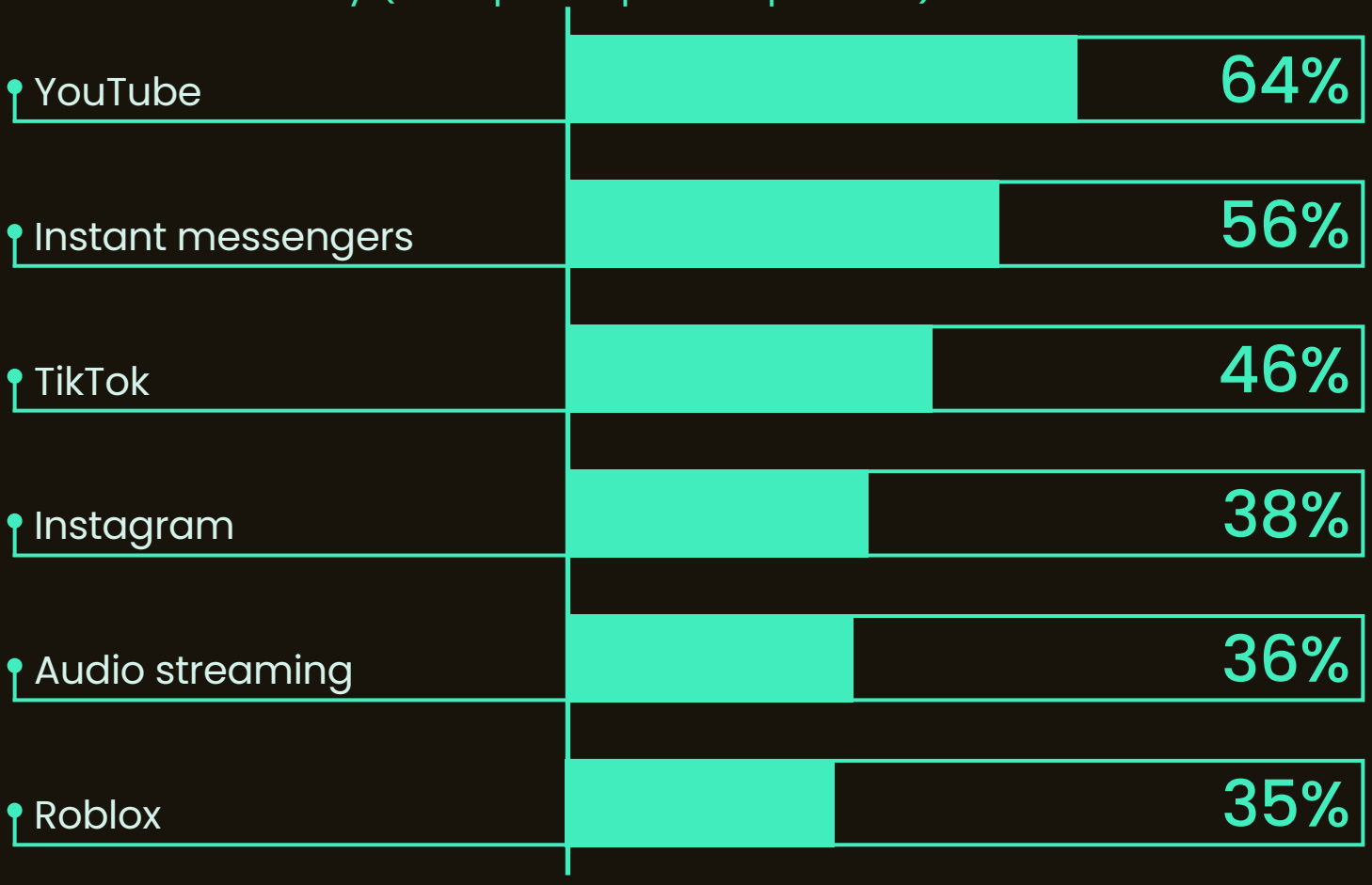
Boys report higher engagement with gaming, while girls are more active on social media and somewhat more involved in information-seeking and creative activities.

Platforms, algorithms, and consumption patterns

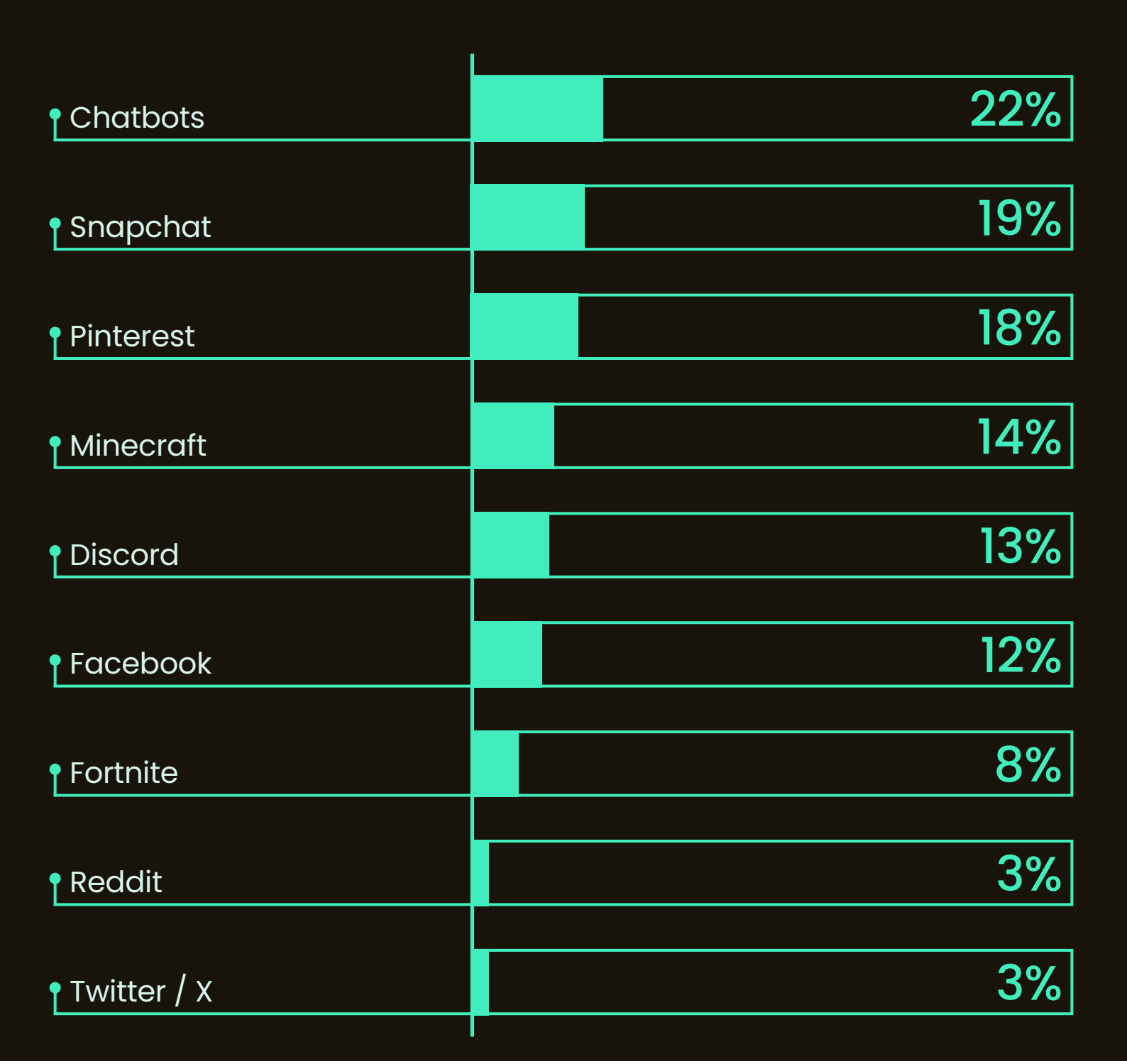
Daily platform use confirms a video-centered digital environment. YouTube is the most widely used platform, followed by messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Messenger, TikTok, and Instagram. Gaming platforms like Roblox are particularly important among younger children, while Instagram and TikTok become more central during adolescence (Graph 10).

GRAPH 10.

Platform hierarchy (multiple response question)[9]



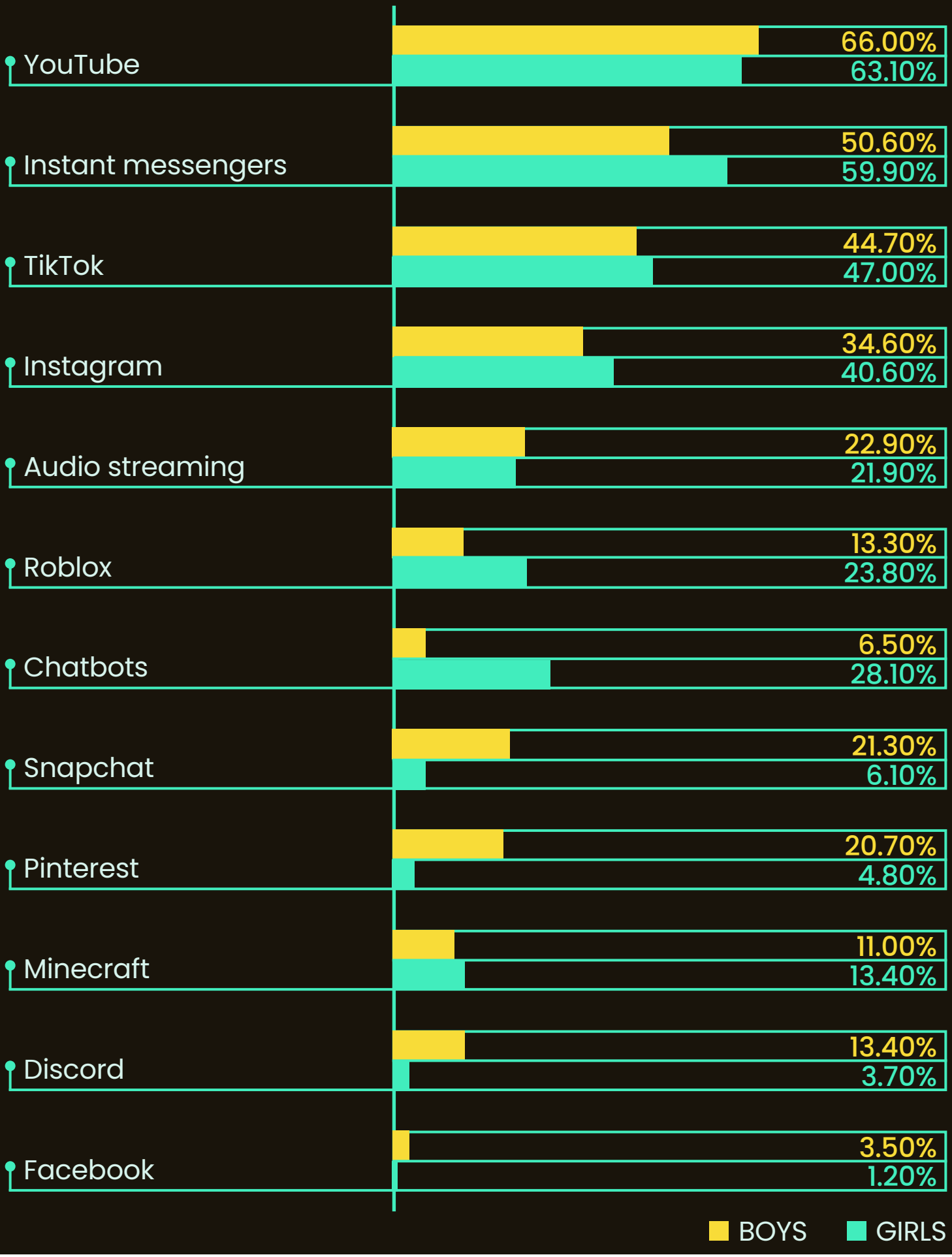
9 — idem



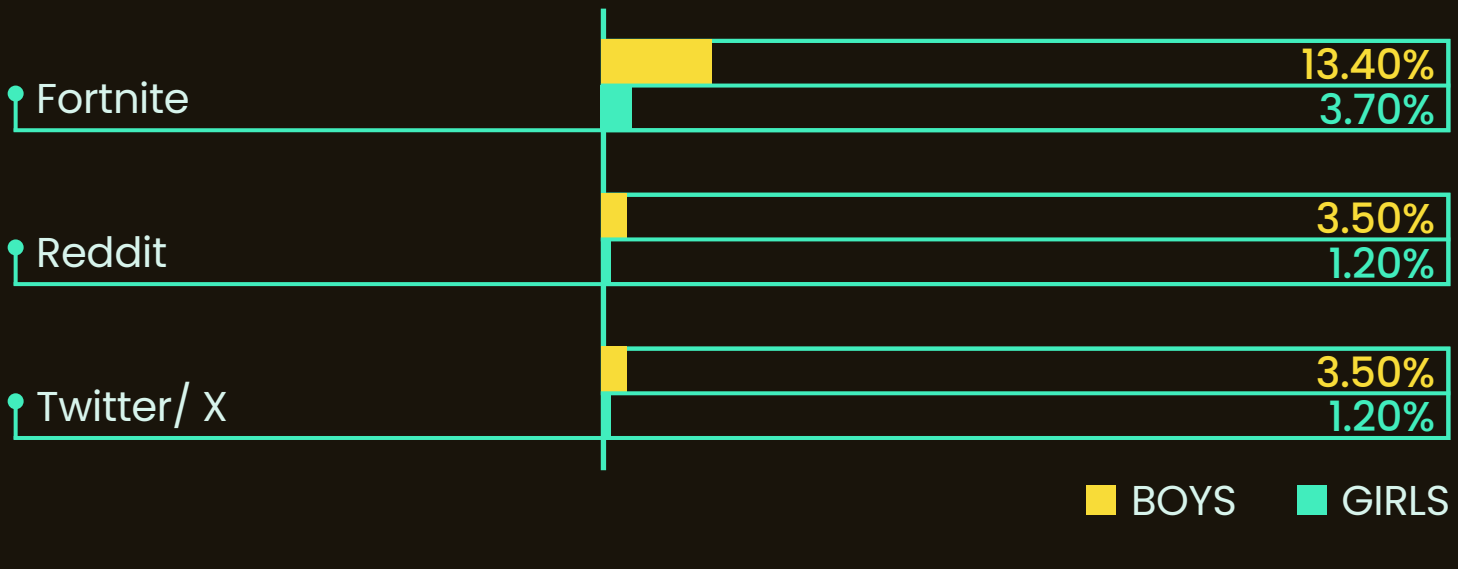
Children rarely describe searching intentionally. Instead, they respond to what appears in their feed. Platforms organize attention automatically and reduce decision-making effort. Gaming plays a key role in childhood, while adolescence brings a shift toward socially networked platforms focused on identity and peer visibility. Gender patterns reinforce this structure (Graph 11).

GRAPH 11.

Platform hierarchy by gender (multiple response question)[10]



10 — idem



Boys are more active on gaming platforms, while girls report higher use of Instagram, messaging apps, and visually expressive platforms. However, YouTube and TikTok function as shared spaces across genders.

Platform choice is shaped by three main factors: fast entertainment, constant peer connection, and algorithm-driven content. Children rarely describe deliberate searching. Instead, they react to what appears in their feed. As one participant explained:

I just watch whatever pops up that looks fun. As soon as something cool appears on my phone, I just start watching it. *Poland, Year 2, large city*

This reflects a reactive consumption logic, where platforms organize attention automatically and minimize decision-making effort.

The relational dimension is equally important. Platforms are spaces where peers are present and interaction is continuous. Even simple statements like **I'm on TikTok and Instagram.** *Romania, FG Bucharest, 11–12 years old* suggest how fully integrated these platforms are into daily routines.

Age differences remain visible. Younger children are more focused on gaming and video consumption, while adolescents shift toward socially networked platforms linked to identity, visibility, and peer validation. Gender patterns reinforce this structure: boys report higher gaming activity, while girls are more active on social media and messaging platforms. However, YouTube and TikTok function as shared cultural spaces across genders.

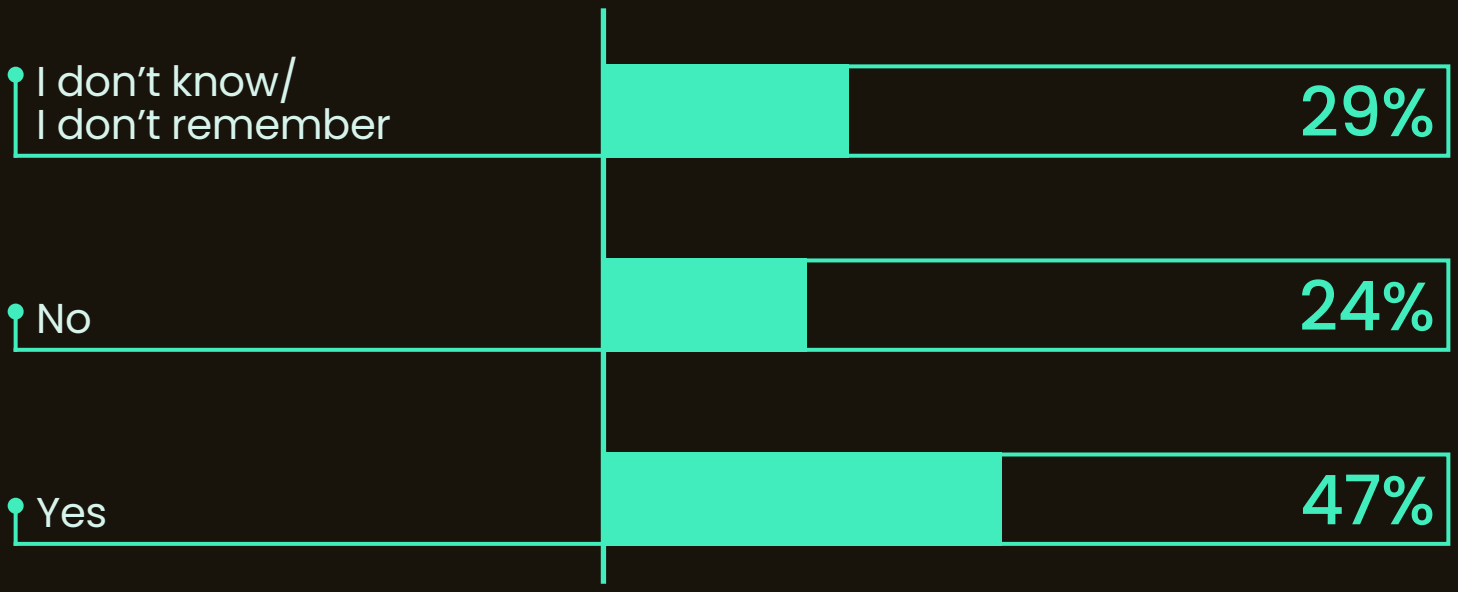
Overall, Generation Alpha's digital life is structured around connection, entertainment, and algorithmically curated content. With age, these practices become more autonomous, socially visible, and closely tied to peer identity.

Exposure to misinformation

Approximately 47% of respondents report having encountered online content in the past month that they perceived as false or misleading. Around 24% state that they did not encounter such content, while nearly 29% indicate that they do not know or do not remember (Graph 12). Even within an exploratory sample, this proportion suggests that exposure to problematic or potentially misleading information is relatively common among children and adolescents.

Age differences are substantial. Adolescents aged 12–15 report exposure far more frequently than children aged 8–11, who are more likely to state that they did not encounter misleading content. This gap likely reflects both increased exposure and increased awareness. Older adolescents spend more time on socially networked and algorithm-driven platforms, which may increase the probability of encountering misleading information. At the same time, cognitive development and accumulated digital experience may enhance their ability to recognize problematic content as such.

GRAPH 12.
Exposure to misinformation



Age appears to be an important factor in explaining exposure to misinformation. As children grow older, their online time increases, their platform use expands, and their awareness of misleading content becomes more developed.

Verification strategies

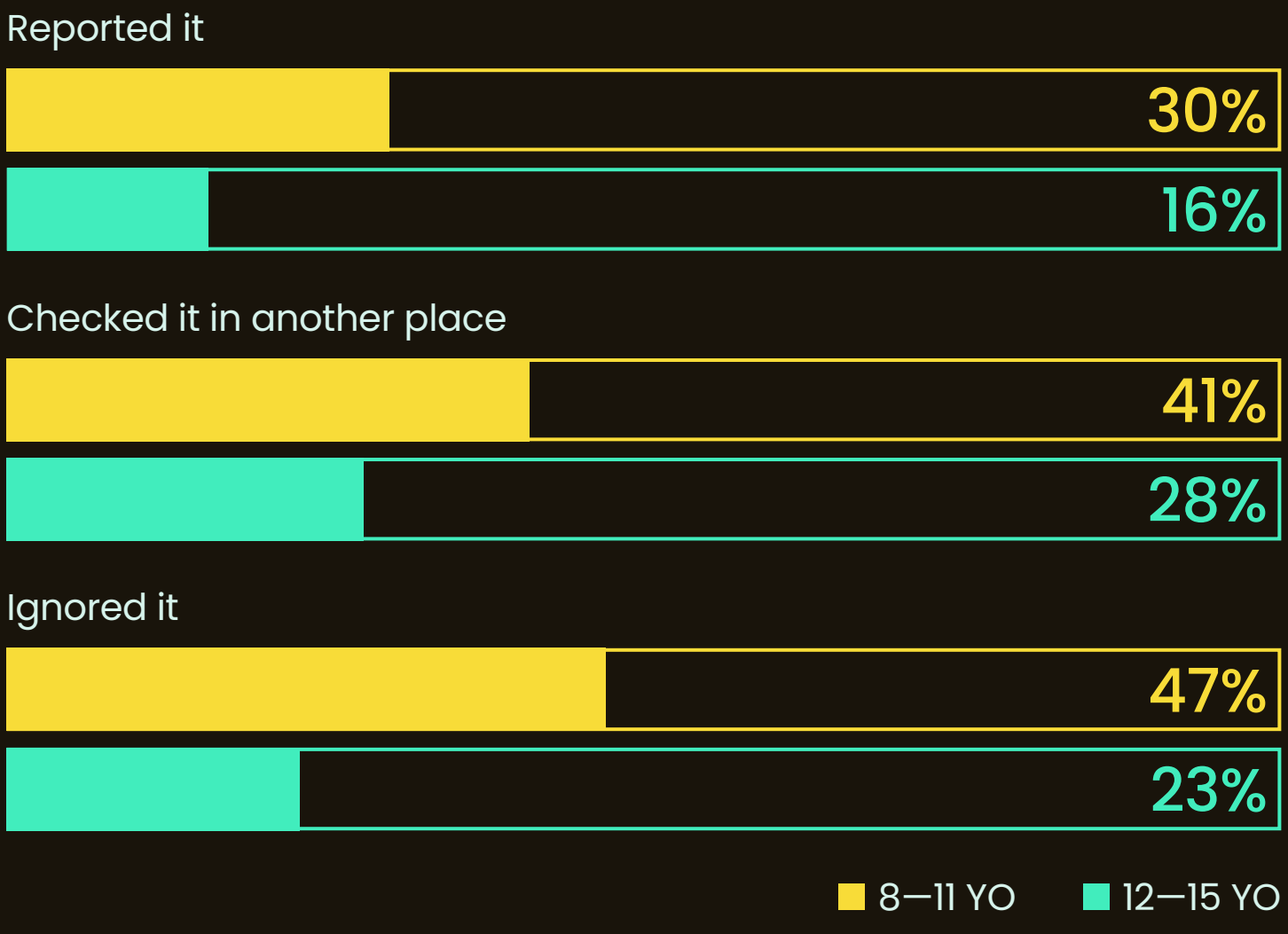
Beyond simple exposure to misleading content, it is essential to examine how children and adolescents report reacting to and verifying such information. This dimension is central for understanding the literacy index and for interpreting the relationship between critical competence and civic engagement.

The data show a mix of passive and active responses. A substantial proportion of respondents state that they ignore misleading content. Others mention unfollowing the source or doing nothing. At the same time, a significant share report more active strategies, such as checking the information in another source or reporting the content.

Age differences are clear and consistent. Adolescents aged 12–15 are more likely to report checking information elsewhere (41%) or reporting the content (30%), compared to children aged 8–11 (28% and 16%,

respectively). Younger children are more likely to ignore misleading content (23%), while almost half of adolescents (47%) also report ignoring it, indicating that even among older groups, passive reactions remain common (Graph 13). These differences suggest both cognitive development and a changing sense of digital responsibility with age.

GRAPH 13.
Reaction to misinformation by age group



Qualitative findings help explain these patterns. Verification is rarely described as a fixed routine. Instead, it is activated selectively, especially when a topic feels personally relevant: **... if I'm interested, I find out more.** *Romania, FG Cireșu, 12–14 years old*. A common strategy is source comparison: **I also look at the second source, to be sure.** *Romania, FG Bucharest, 13–14 years old.* However, this practice remains intuitive rather than systematic.

Younger children more frequently rely on adults as reference points: **You have to check the sources, talk to your parents or maybe older people.** *Romania, FG Bucharest, 11–12 years old.* This indicates that critical evaluation at earlier ages is often relational and mediated rather than fully autonomous.

Importantly, literacy in this context does not simply mean knowing how to verify information, but being willing to activate that skill. Not all respondents who declare that they can check information do so consistently. This distinction becomes analytically relevant in regression models, where literacy may have different effects depending on national context and on the combination with other digital orientations.

Overall, the data suggest that Generation Alpha's digital environment is not purely passive. Practices of critical evaluation do emerge, particularly in early adolescence. However, these practices are unevenly distributed and age-dependent. This justifies treating the literacy index as a distinct predictor in modelling civic engagement, rather than assuming that exposure or autonomy alone generate critical competence.

CONTENT PREFERENCES AND THE LOGIC OF ATTENTION

YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

Content preferences and the logic of attention

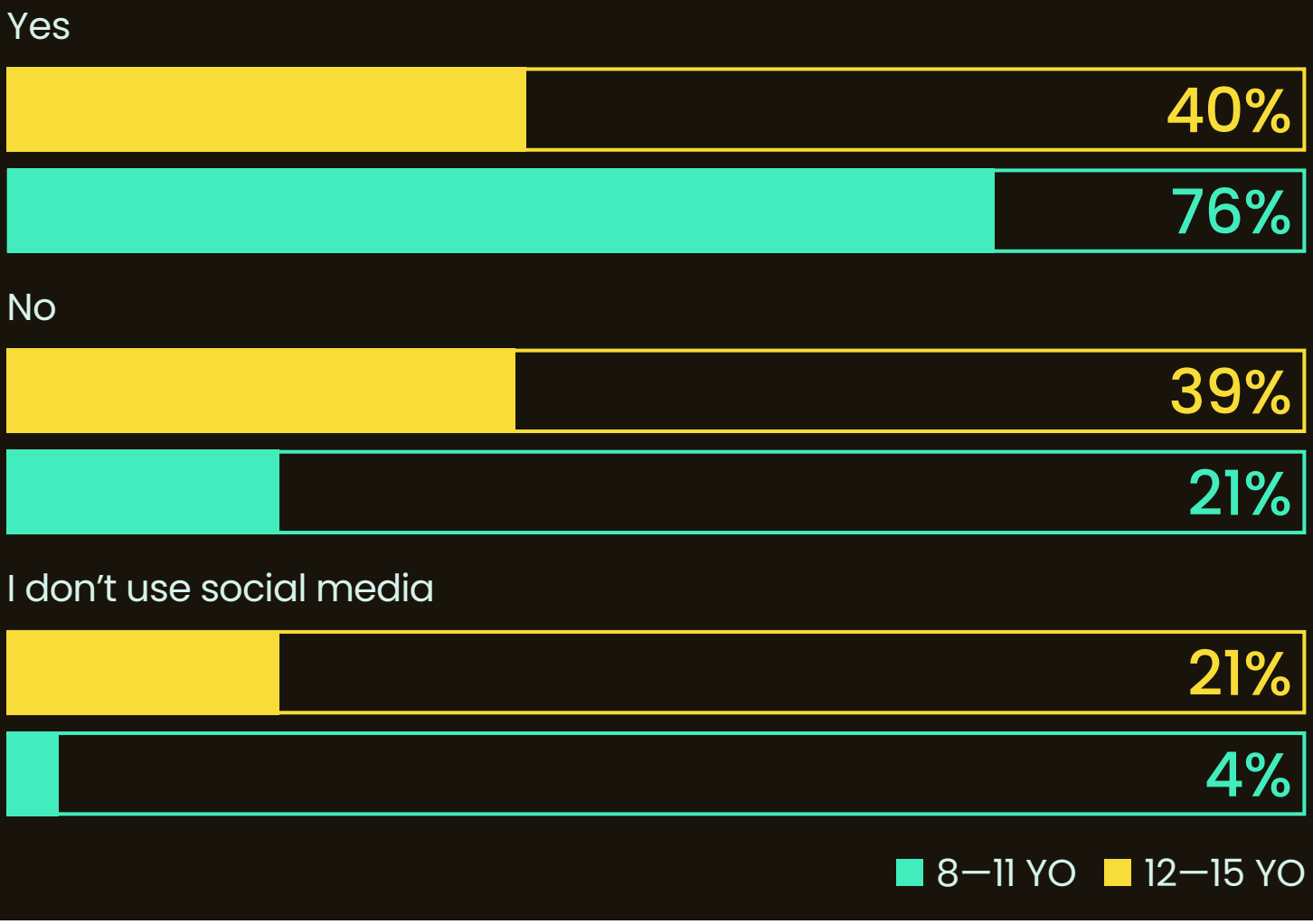
Following influencers

Following influencers is common among respondents. More than 60% of respondents say they follow influencers or content creators on social media. Around one quarter say they do not follow influencers, and a small minority report that they do not use social media at all. This shows that influencers play a central role in the digital lives of many children and adolescents.

Most of those who follow influencers (76%) are aged 12–15, while only 40% are aged 8–11 (Graph 14). Younger children are also much more likely to say that they do not use social media at all (21%), nor that they are following influencers online (39%). This shows a clear shift between middle childhood and early adolescence. As children grow older, social media becomes more central in their daily life, and engagement with influencers increases significantly. Following content creators is therefore primarily an adolescent behaviour.

The findings suggest that following influencers becomes a defining feature of early adolescence. It reflects greater involvement in social media environments and stronger integration into peer-oriented digital culture.

GRAFIC 14.
Following influencers by age group



The main reasons for following influencers are related to entertainment and style. The most frequent answers are that influencers have a funny or interesting style and that they provide entertainment. Many respondents also say they follow them because they like them or find them authentic. Fewer respondents mention learning something or discussing important topics as their main reason.

This shows that attention is driven mainly by attraction and emotional appeal rather than by civic relevance. Children and adolescents are drawn first by what is engaging and entertaining. From the perspective of civic engagement, this is important: any strategy that aims to increase interest in public issues needs to work within this logic of attention.

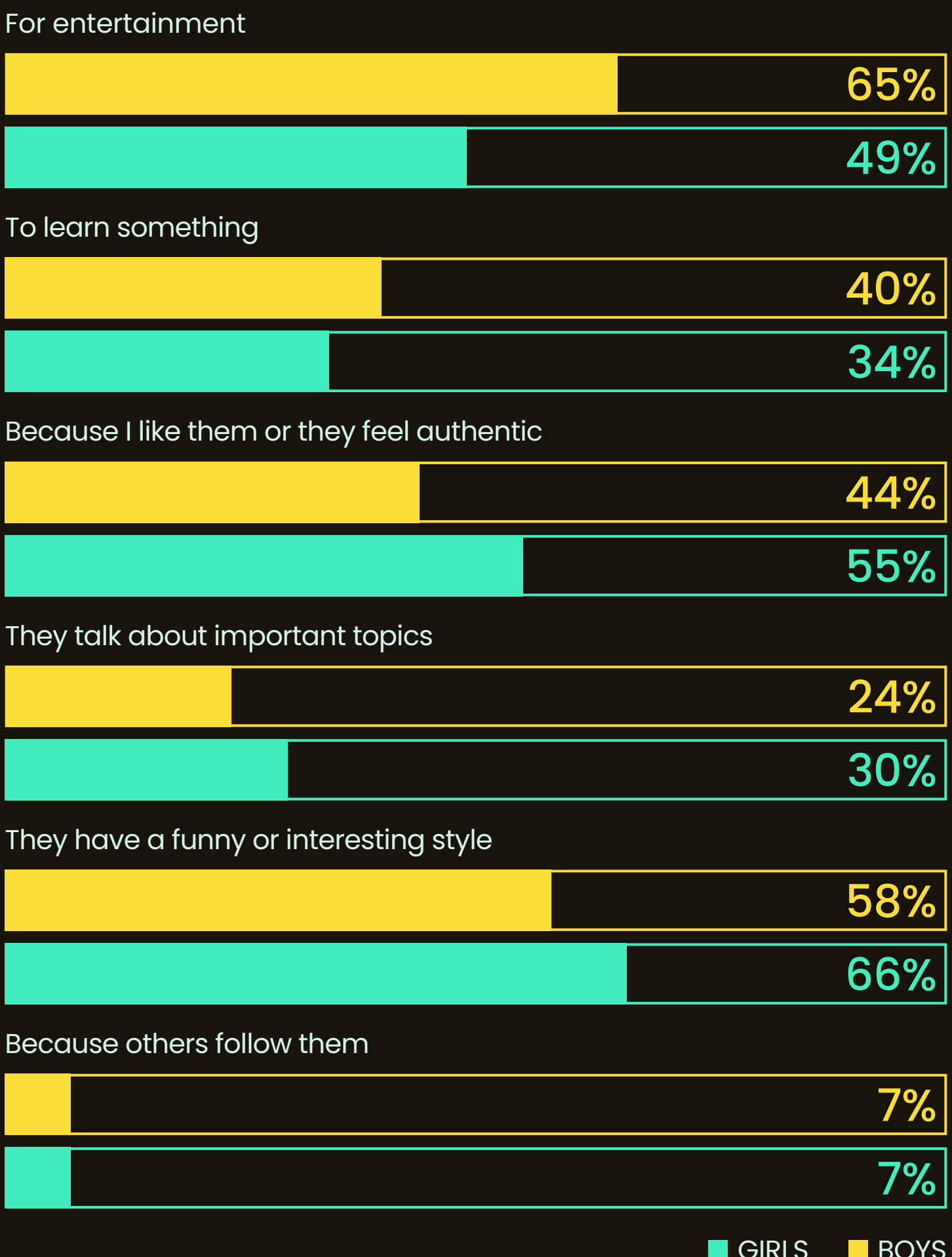
Adolescents aged 12–15 are more likely to mention authenticity and important topics as motivations, while children aged 8–11 are

more strongly oriented toward pure entertainment. This suggests that motivations diversify with age, and that older adolescents become somewhat more open to content with greater substance.

Gender differences in motivation are clearly visible. Boys are primarily motivated by entertainment, indicating a predominantly recreational orientation. Girls, in contrast, are more motivated by the influencer's funny or interesting style and by authenticity, and to a greater extent by the important topics they address (Graph 15).

GRAFIC 15.

Reasons for following influencers by gender



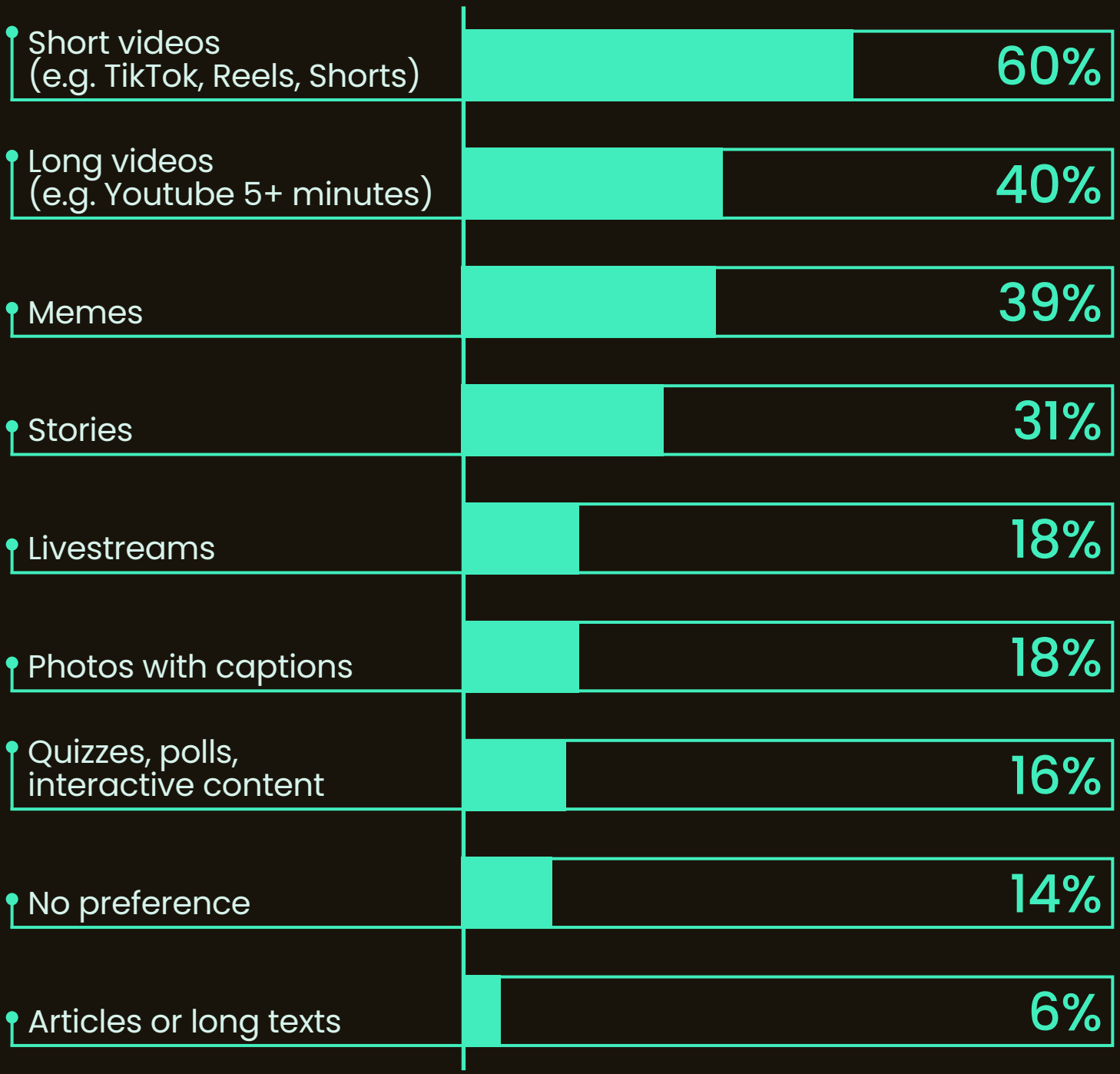
Even within an exploratory design, the pattern is consistent: the relationship with influencers is not purely recreational, but entertainment remains the main entry point.

What types of content do they prefer

Declared preferences clearly confirm the central role of short and dynamic formats in the attention structure of Generation Alpha. Short video content (TikTok, Reels, Shorts) is the most frequently selected option, accounting for around 60% of cases (percent of cases) (Graph 16). At a considerable distance follow longer videos (over 5 minutes), memes, and stories, each mentioned by roughly one third to two fifths of respondents. Long-form text or articles are selected far less often.

GRAPH 16.

Overall content preferences (multiple response question)[11]



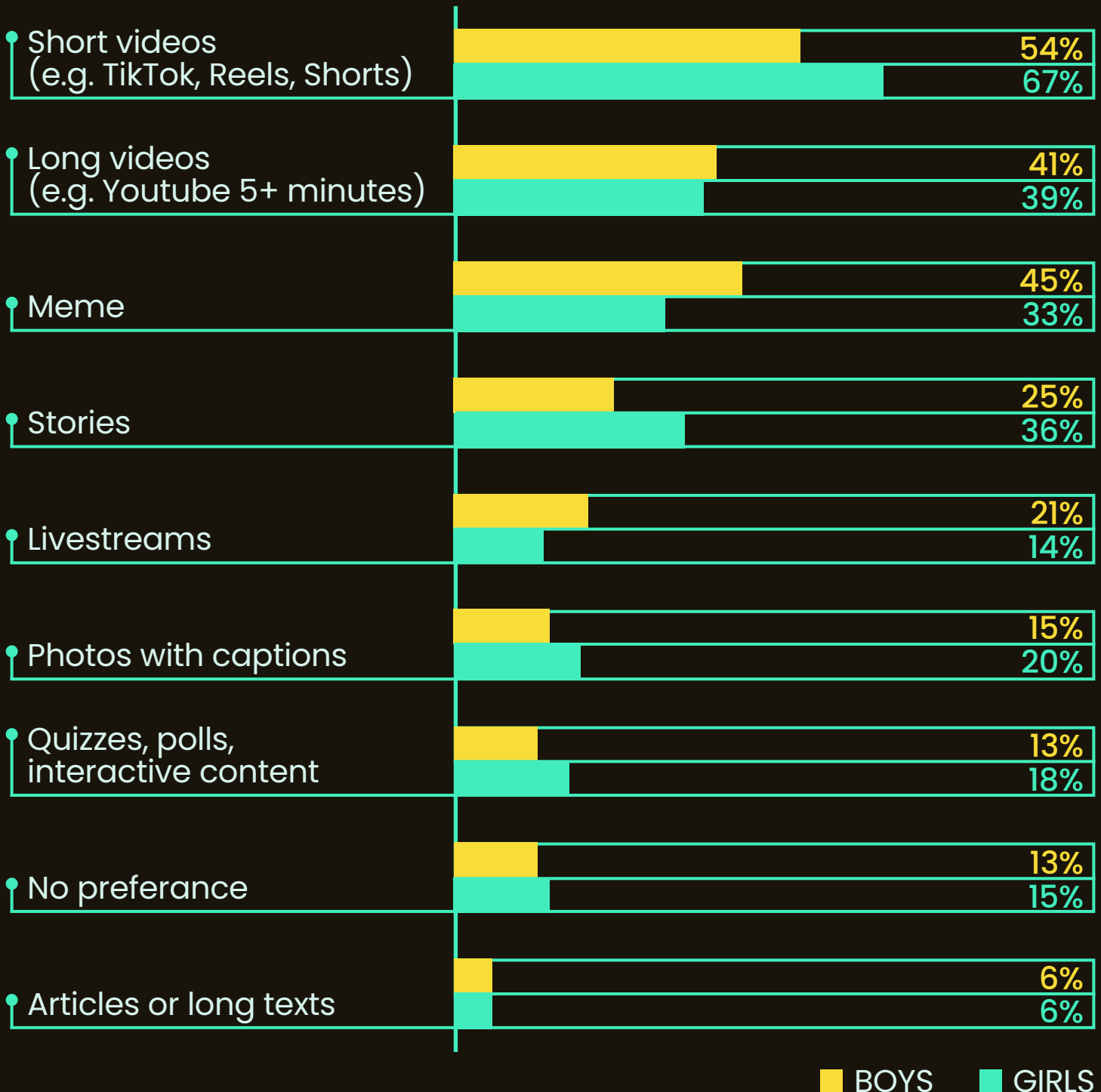
This distribution indicates a strong orientation toward fast, visual, and immediately rewarding formats. The pattern is consistent with how young people describe their everyday communication: messages are short, visual, and emotionally expressive. Emojis and memes are used to make interaction quicker and more engaging, suggesting that efficiency and tone matter as much as content. In this environment, form plays a decisive role in attracting attention.

11 — idem

Age differences do not alter the overall hierarchy, but they introduce nuance. Adolescents aged 12–15 are more likely than children aged 8–11 to indicate interest in longer videos and more structured content (Graph 17). Interest in longer texts remains limited overall, but it is slightly higher among older adolescents. In contrast, shorter and more playful formats are relatively more prominent among the younger group.

GRAPH 17.

Content preferences by age group (multiple response question)[12]



12 — idem

This pattern suggests that attention becomes more flexible with age, while short formats remain dominant across both groups. There is no clear shift from entertainment to "serious content." Instead, the data point to a diversification of preferences.

While quantitative data describe structural preferences, qualitative evidence clarifies the mechanisms underlying attention and selection. The findings indicate that the online experience is organised around an attention economy in which emotion, personal relevance, and social interaction function as primary filters. The quotes do not merely reflect individual tastes; they reveal the logic through which content is selected, evaluated, and integrated into everyday life.

Emotion emerges as a key mechanism for capturing and retaining attention. Statements such as **I like videos where I don't expect the ending – something pops up that you don't see coming.** Or **Videos of road accidents filmed with a camera frighten me and I like them.** *Italy, interviews* show that surprise, intensity, and even fear operate as triggers of interest in a content-saturated environment. Conversely, the banal is rejected: **I don't like videos of people on social media describing how they spend their day when there's nothing special or entertaining about what they do. A 'normal' day.** *Italy, interview.* In this logic, the absence of affective stimulus equates to a lack of value; content must generate a reaction to justify attention.

Selection also operates through identity filtering. When a child notes, **I stop if I see videos about sports or dogs or cats.** *Romania, FG Bucharest, 11–12 years,* it becomes clear that attention is guided by pre-existing interests. While algorithms provide options, relevance is recognised quickly and personally; content is validated when it aligns with hobbies or passions, turning the internet into an extension of thematic identity.

The relational dimension further structures this logic. Online profiles and interactions function as infrastructures of symbolic communication. As one participant explains, **Most people... still have an Instagram profile where they put up photos, stories... Socially, basically.** *Poland, High school.* Another observes, **Now people communicate through reposts.** *Poland, IDI, 16.* The repost becomes an indirect message and a tool of social positioning within peer networks.

Finally, personal content production is shaped by caution and image management. Examples such as posting about playing football or Roblox (Poland, Year 2) suggest a desire to create, but within controlled and reputationally safe boundaries. Awareness of potential social evaluation indicates a careful negotiation of visibility and exposure.

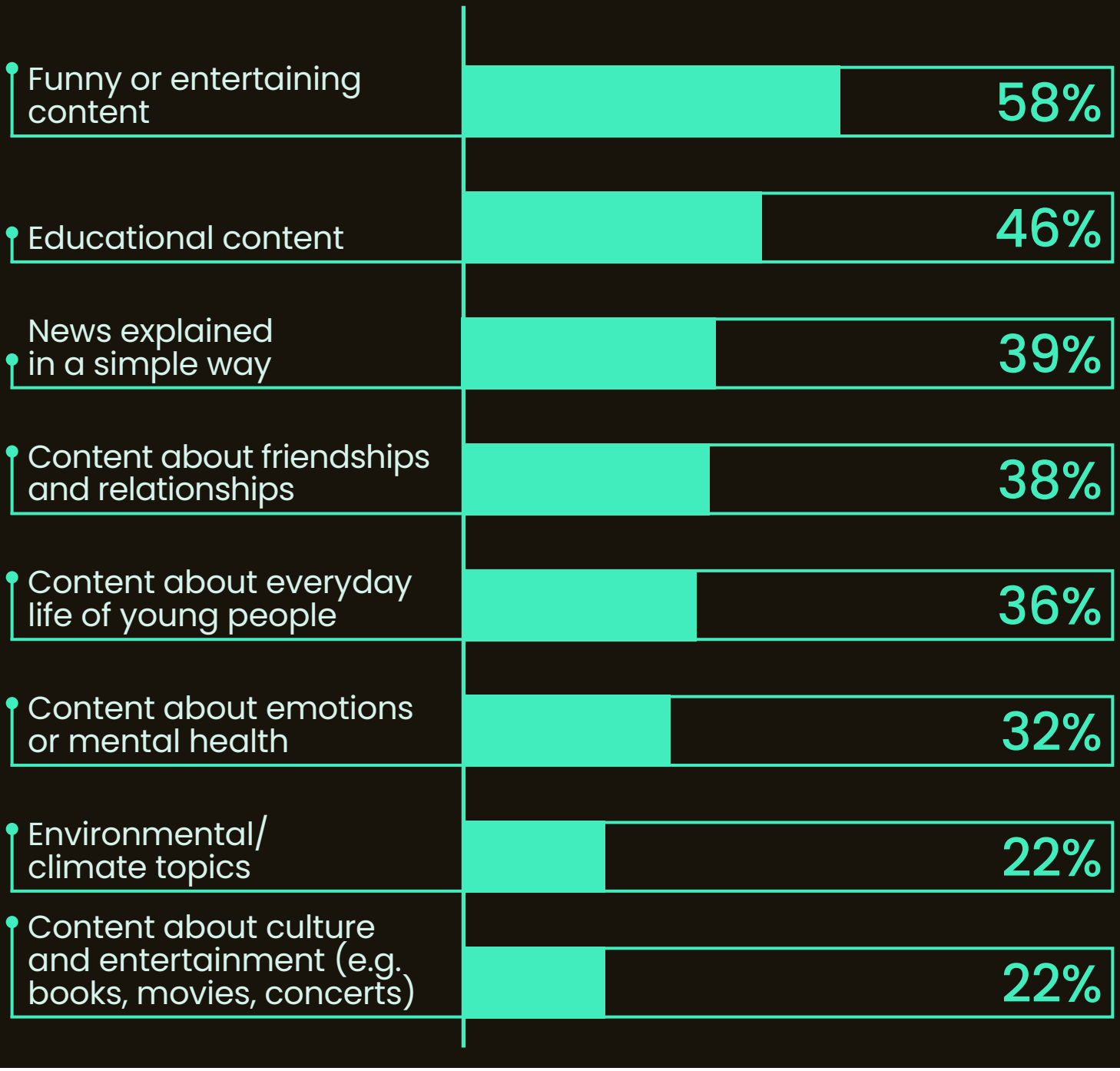
The tension between form and substance is therefore central. The findings do not indicate a rejection of socially relevant topics. Rather, they suggest that such topics are more likely to gain attention when presented in formats adapted to digital rhythms. The quantitative results show that entertainment-oriented formats can coexist with interest in educational or explanatory content. This complexity is important for the subsequent modelling of engagement, where form and substance should not be treated as simple opposites.

What content should adults create?

When respondents are asked what kind of content adults should create for adolescents, the structure of answers differs from the everyday logic of entertainment observed in daily consumption (Graph 18). Although funny or entertaining content is still frequently mentioned, educational and socially relevant themes become much more visible.

GRAPH 18.

Types of content adults should create for adolescents (multiple response question)[13]



Educational content is selected by nearly half of respondents (percent of cases), while "news explained in a simple way" is mentioned by around 40%. Topics related to friendships, relationships, emotions, and mental health also rank high. Environmental and cultural themes are less frequent, but still present.

This distribution suggests that, at a reflective or normative level, children and adolescents recognise the value of socially relevant and

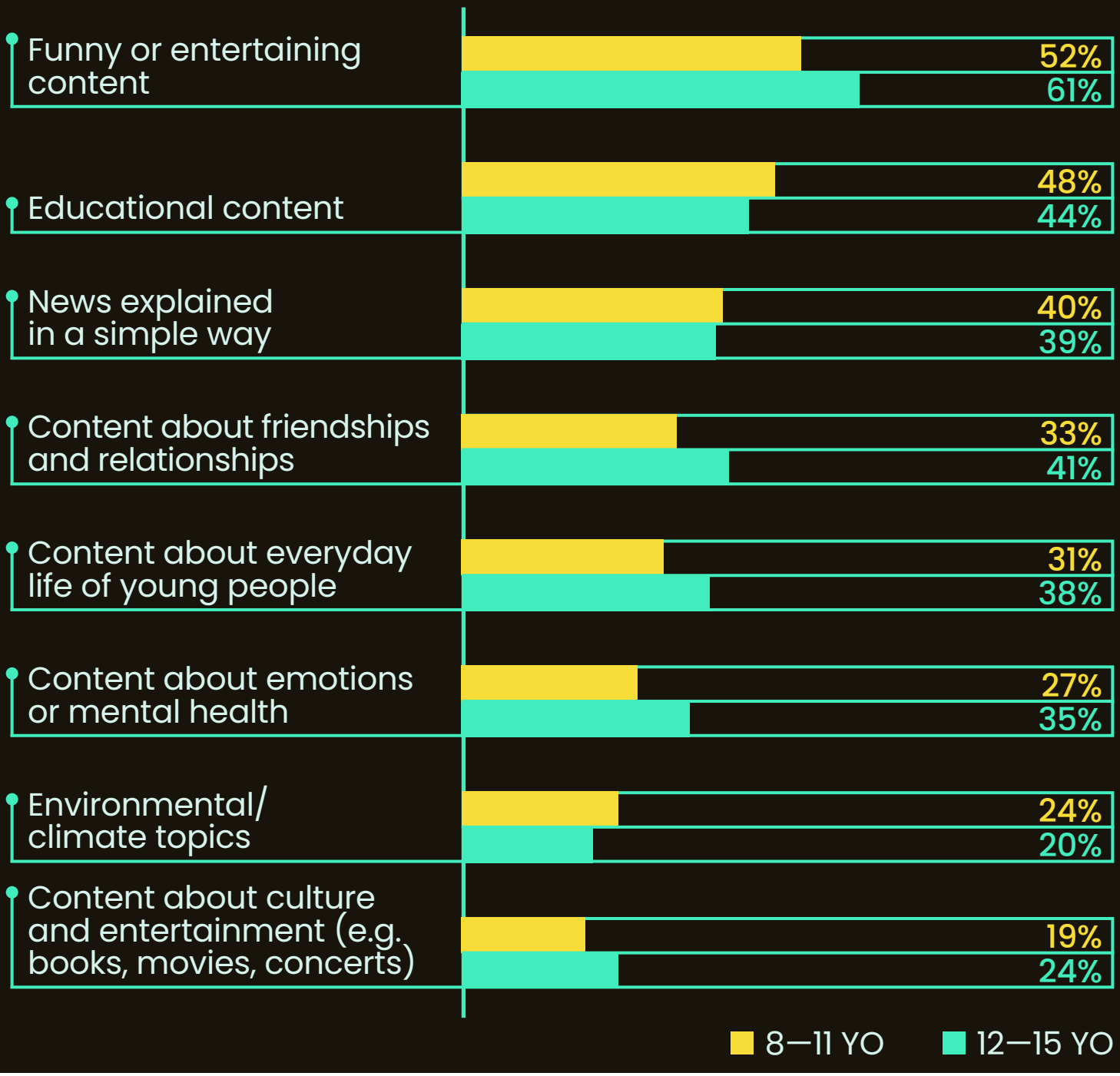
13 — idem

formative content. The contrast with daily consumption preferences — dominated by short videos and entertainment — indicates a distinction between what is immediately attractive and what is perceived as useful or important.

Adolescents aged 12–15 are more likely than children aged 8–11 to indicate interest in relationships, emotions, current affairs, and simplified news explanations. In the younger group, funny content and topics closer to immediate daily life are more prominent (Graph 19).

GRAPH 19.

Perceived relevant content by age group (multiple response question)[14]



14 — idem

This pattern aligns with the cognitive and social transition typical of early adolescence. As autonomy and digital exposure increase, and parental control decreases, openness to more abstract or socially relevant themes also grows.

DEVELOPMENTAL THRESHOLD: AGE AS THE MAIN DRIVER

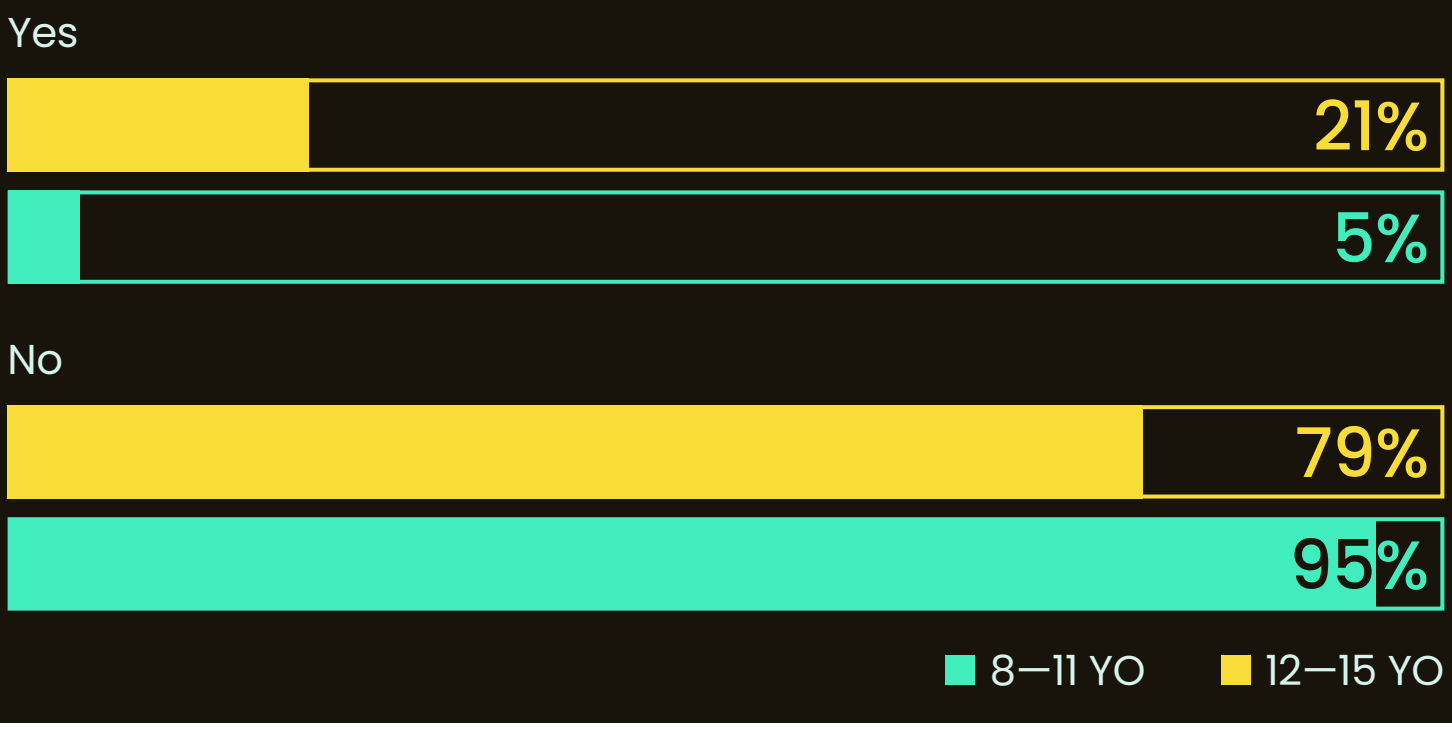
YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

Developmental threshold: age as the main driver

Interest in news

The differences between the two age groups are clear and consistent when considering the topic of our research. In the aggregated exploratory sample, about 5% of children aged 8–11 say they are interested in news, compared to about 21% of adolescents aged 12–15 (Graph 20). This difference is substantial and statistically significant.[15]

GRAPH 20.
Interest in News by Age Group



Beyond statistical significance, the size of the gap is what matters most: interest in news increases roughly fourfold between the two age groups.

Qualitative data support this pattern and help explain the low levels of declared interest in news among younger respondents. News and current events rarely appear as primary entry points in children's everyday online activity. Instead, exposure tends to occur indirectly, embedded

15 — $X^2 = 81.001, p < .001$

in entertainment formats or within the algorithmic flow of social media. Informational content is usually activated pragmatically, when it connects to school tasks or a specific curiosity: **Interesting, informative... and some that help us with our school lessons.** *Romania, FG Ploiești, 14–15 years old.*

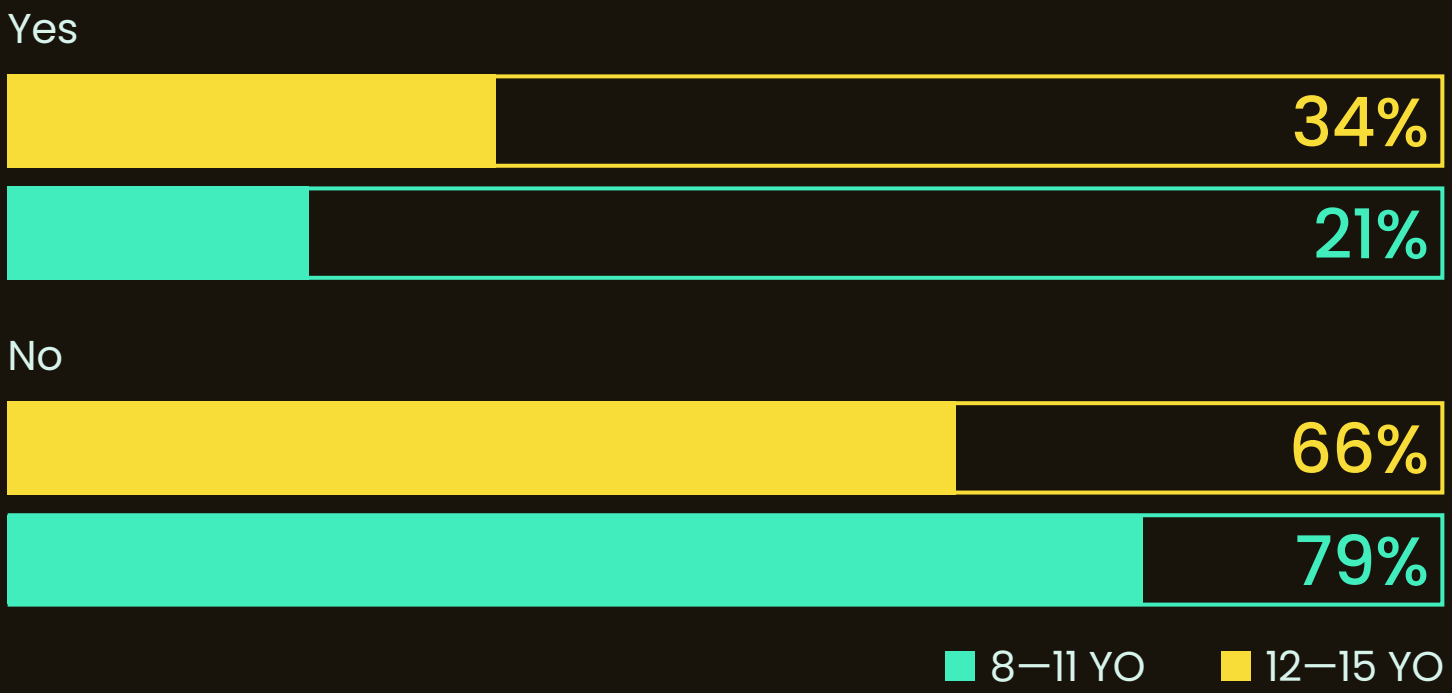
For younger children, news is more often encountered incidentally than actively sought. As age increases, particularly in early adolescence, informational content becomes more visible and more intentionally selected, but it remains integrated into a digital environment largely structured by entertainment and peer interaction.

Civic engagement by age

The age difference is visible not only in interest in news, but also in orientation toward content perceived as "useful" or "important" (Graph 21). To examine this dimension more clearly, we constructed a composite variable labelled civic engagement.

The indicator combines several items referring to socially relevant content, such as news, educational material, or topics perceived as important for understanding society. Based on these items, respondents were classified according to whether they show a civic-oriented pattern of content preferences. The purpose of this measure was analytical: rather than examining isolated activities, it captures a broader orientation toward socially relevant content.

GRAPH 21.
Civic oriented pattern by age



The distribution of this indicator reveals clear age differences. Among children aged 8–11, about 21% display a civic-oriented content pattern, while in the 12–15 age group this share increases to about 34% (Graph 21). The difference is statistically significant.

In terms of effect size, the relationship is small to moderate. This indicates that age plays a role in shaping civic orientation, but it does not fully explain it. Rather than replacing entertainment-oriented content, civic-related interests appear to gradually expand the digital repertoire as children move into early adolescence. Other factors—such as informational curiosity, digital literacy, and contextual influences—likely interact with age in shaping this orientation.

Substantively, the results suggest that adolescents aged 12–15 are more receptive to content perceived as socially relevant. However, this shift does not replace entertainment orientation. Rather, it indicates that socially relevant interests gradually become part of the digital repertoire as children more into early adolescence.

FINAL MODEL OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

Final model of civic engagement

What drives civic orientation?

To better understand what shapes young people's orientation toward socially relevant content, we built three broader measures based on earlier survey questions. These orientations were built from earlier survey questions and capture different ways in which young people use the internet:

- Informational orientation index – interest in news, explanations, and educational content
- Entertainment orientation index – preference for fun, humorous, or highly engaging content
- Digital literacy orientation index – practices such as checking sources, comparing information, or verifying content

Instead of analysing each behaviour separately, we combined them into structured indices and tested how they influence the probability of civic engagement. The results are clear.

WHAT DRIVES CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

Civic engagement is more likely when:

- **Informational interest is strong**
  Young people actively follow news, explanations and educational content.
- **Digital literacy is developed**
  They check sources and compare information.
- **Entertainment and civic interest coexist**
  Enjoying fun content does not exclude engagement with important topics.

The overall pattern is clear. Civic engagement is more likely when informational interest is strong and when digital literacy practices are present. Young people who actively seek information, follow explanations,

and show curiosity about understanding topics are significantly more inclined to interact with content they perceive as "useful" or "important." Importantly, entertainment orientation does not reduce civic engagement. Enjoying short videos or humorous content does not make young people less responsive to socially relevant topics. These dimensions can coexist within the same digital profile.

When these digital orientations are taken into account, age differences become smaller. This suggests that adolescents are more civic-oriented not simply because they are older, but because their digital habits evolve — particularly in terms of informational interest and literacy practices.

Country differences also become less pronounced once digital orientations are included in the model. The general pattern is similar across Romania, Poland, and Italy. In simple terms, civic engagement appears to be shaped more by how young people use digital media than by where they live.

The role of each index

While the overall model shows that digital habits matter, it is important to understand how each orientation contributes individually.

The strongest predictor of civic engagement is informational orientation. Children and adolescents who use the internet to learn, search for information, or follow news are substantially more likely to engage with content they perceive as meaningful. Civic engagement does not emerge randomly; it builds on an already information-oriented digital routine.

Digital literacy also has a positive effect. Young people who report checking sources, comparing information, or questioning credibility are more inclined to interact with socially relevant content. However, literacy alone does not fully explain engagement. It reinforces informational interest but does not replace it as the primary driver.

Entertainment orientation plays a different role. It does not undermine civic engagement, but it is not the strongest predictor either. Rather than competing with informational use, entertainment functions alongside

it. A digitally active young person can simultaneously enjoy attractive formats and respond to socially relevant topics.

WHAT DRIVES CIVIC ENGAGEMENT?

- Strong informational interest (strongest predictor)
- Higher Digital literacy (moderate effect effect)
- Entertainment orientation (positive but smaller effect)

This finding is strategically important. It suggests that format and substance do not need to be opposed. Engaging, dynamic, or entertaining formats can serve as a bridge toward meaningful content, especially when combined with informational value.

Taken together, the results indicate that civic orientation grows primarily out of informational curiosity, supported by digital literacy, and is compatible with entertainment-driven media habits.

Interactions

After estimating the combined model, we examined whether the effects of the three digital orientations vary by country or gender.

The results show a high degree of stability. Informational interest increases civic engagement consistently across Romania, Poland, and Italy. Digital literacy also plays a positive role in all three contexts, while entertainment orientation does not reduce civic engagement. Although the strength of the effects may vary slightly, the overall structure of relationships remains the same across countries.

A similar pattern emerges for gender. Informational interest and digital literacy increase civic engagement for both girls and boys, and entertainment orientation remains compatible with civic involvement. Gender introduces minor variations in intensity, but it does not fundamentally reshape the model.

Overall, civic engagement appears to be driven more by digital orientations than by national context or gender differences.

What remains significant – final model summary

After estimating the full model and testing all variables together, a clear pattern emerges. Some factors remain strong and consistent predictors of civic engagement, while others lose part of their initial importance once digital habits are taken into account.

Informational interest is the strongest factor.

Young people who use the internet to learn, search for information, or follow news are much more likely to engage with content they see as socially relevant or important.

Digital literacy also matters.

Those who check information, compare sources, or think critically online are more likely to show civic engagement. Critical skills strengthen engagement.

Entertainment does not reduce civic engagement.

Enjoying dynamic, fun, short-form content does not mean being less civic-minded. Entertainment and civic interest can coexist.

Age becomes less powerful once digital habits are considered.

Older adolescents (12–15) appear more civic-oriented at first. But when we account for informational interest and digital literacy, the direct effect of age becomes much weaker. This means that age matters mainly because digital habits change with age.

Country differences are not central.

Some small differences appear between Romania, Poland, and Italy, but they are not consistent. The overall structure of the model remains similar across countries.

Civic engagement is primarily linked to:

- Strong informational orientation
- Higher digital literacy
- Active digital use (including entertainment)

The model does not explain everything — which is expected in a complex phenomenon — but it identifies a clear core pattern.[16]

16 — All findings are based on exploratory samples and describe internal relationships, not national population estimates.

AUDIENCE TYPOLOGIES & DIGITAL PROFILES

YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

Audience typologies — digital profiles

To better understand what types of digital users emerge in our data, we used cluster analysis. While regression showed which factors influence civic engagement, cluster analysis shows how these behaviours combine into real-life user profiles.

We relied on three digital orientations: interest in information, interest in entertainment, and digital literacy. Based on these dimensions, we identified three distinct user profiles. Choosing three groups allows for a clear interpretation that is also useful from a strategic perspective.

It is important to note that these profiles come from an exploratory sample. They reflect internal patterns within the analysed data, not official population categories.

Active but less critical

This group consists of young people who are highly active online. They frequently consume both informative and entertaining content. They are exposed to many types of messages and spend a significant amount of time in the digital environment. However, they are less inclined to check sources or critically analyse the information they encounter.

In terms of civic engagement, this profile shows the highest level: approximately 47% of its members express openness to content perceived as "useful" or "important." This is the largest proportion among the three identified groups. The result suggests that being active and interested in information matters more than having critical skills alone.

This profile is present in all three countries analysed, with slightly higher shares in Poland and Romania compared to Italy. Roughly one third of each national sample falls into this category, making it a relevant and consistent segment.

From a strategic perspective, this is the group with the greatest immediate potential. Its members are already connected, interested in information, and active online. The goal is not to convince them to engage, but rather to support them by:

- presenting important topics in attractive and dynamic formats;
- strengthening their critical approach to evaluating information.

This is the most promising segment for achieving broad and rapid impact.

Critical and selective

This group stands out for its strong digital literacy. These young people report checking information, comparing sources, and thinking carefully about what they encounter online. Although they may not consume as much content as the more active segment, they approach digital media in a more reflective and cautious way.

In terms of civic engagement, about 25% of this group show openness to content perceived as "useful" or "important." At first glance, one might expect the most critical users to display the highest level of civic engagement, since verification and careful thinking are important skills. However, the results suggest a more nuanced picture: critical skills alone do not automatically translate into higher engagement.

This profile appears mainly in Poland and Italy. In the weighted Romanian sample, it represents a much smaller segment, while in Poland and Italy it accounts for a substantial share of respondents.

From a strategic perspective, these young people already possess critical competencies. What they need is not basic media literacy, but stronger motivation and curiosity toward informative topics, as well as clearer connections between civic content and their everyday interests. If activated, they can become thoughtful and reliable supporters of socially relevant content. However, they are not naturally highly active or highly exposed, so engagement strategies must focus on increasing their level of involvement, not just reinforcing skills they already have.

Low digital involvement

This group scores lower across all three dimensions: informational interest, entertainment orientation, and digital literacy. They are less interested

in news or educational content, less drawn to engaging or entertaining formats, and less likely to check or verify information. Overall, they represent the least digitally engaged segment.

In terms of civic engagement, only about 16% of this group show openness to content perceived as "useful" or "important," making it the lowest level among the three profiles. This aligns with the broader pattern observed earlier: lower overall digital activity is associated with lower civic engagement.

This profile is distributed relatively evenly across all three countries, suggesting that low digital involvement is not tied to a specific national context but reflects a recurring pattern within the broader Generation Alpha landscape.

From a strategic perspective, this is the most difficult group to reach. The immediate goal should not be civic engagement itself, but increasing general digital involvement and sparking basic interest in relevant topics. Content targeting this segment needs to be simple, relatable, and closely connected to everyday life. Only after building initial engagement can more substantive themes be gradually introduced.

Taken together, the three profiles confirm that Generation Alpha is not a single, uniform digital group. Instead, we observe distinct patterns of activity, critical engagement, and involvement, each requiring a differentiated approach.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTENT STRATEGY

YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

Implications for content strategy

The analysis in this report shows that civic engagement among young people is not random. It is closely linked to how they use digital media, how interested they are in information, and how their digital habits evolve with age.

We have seen that interest in information is the strongest driver of engagement. Digital literacy supports it, and entertainment does not weaken it. We have also identified different digital user profiles and clear age differences between children (8–11) and adolescents (12–15).

This section translates these findings into practical guidance. The goal is simple: how can content be designed so that it is relevant, engaging, and developmentally appropriate for Generation Alpha?

The recommendations below are based on patterns observed in the exploratory samples. They are not national statistics, but they provide a clear direction for shaping content strategies that align with how young people actually navigate the digital world.

Children aged 8–11

Children aged 8–11 show low interest in news and limited civic engagement. This should not be seen as disinterest, but as a normal developmental stage. At this age, attention is driven mainly by entertainment, visuals, and short formats. Informational interest — the strongest predictor of civic engagement — is still developing.

The strategic goal should not be direct civic activation, but building curiosity. Content should link everyday experiences to broader themes through stories, relatable characters, and simple explanations. Media literacy can be introduced gradually, in playful and accessible ways. For this group, the priority is exposure and familiarization, not explicit civic framing.

Adolescents aged 12–15

A clear shift appears between ages 12–15. Interest in news and socially relevant content increases. This is linked to stronger informational habits, greater digital autonomy, and higher digital literacy. This group has the highest potential for civic engagement. However, format still matters. Short and dynamic content continues to dominate attention.

Entertainment does not weaken civic interest. Therefore, strategy should not oppose "serious" and "fun" content. Socially relevant topics should be presented in attractive, platform-friendly formats. Adolescents respond best when content connects public issues to identity, relationships, and real-life concerns.

Form vs. content adaptation

Across both age groups, short and dynamic formats dominate. At the same time, interest in meaningful content exists, especially among adolescents. The real tension is not between entertainment and substance, but between traditional formats and digital attention patterns.

For younger children, format is the main entry point. For adolescents, format remains important, but explanation and context become more relevant. The goal is clear: adapt the form without losing the substance.

Activating the "critical but passive" segment

One segment shows strong critical skills but only moderate interest in information. They know how to check content, but they are not highly active consumers. Their engagement is moderate because literacy alone is not enough. Interest in information remains central.

This group does not need basic media literacy training. Instead, they need content that increases curiosity and invites participation. Credible, well-structured, and relevant topics are more effective than purely entertaining formats. If engaged, this segment can become an important multiplier.

Cross-country differences (exploratory)

Some differences appear between Romania, Poland, and Italy, but the overall pattern is similar in all three countries. Interest in information and digital literacy consistently predict civic engagement. Digital profiles matter more than national context. For strategy, segmentation by age and digital profile is more useful than segmentation by country alone. Cultural adaptation may be needed in examples and references, but the general approach can remain consistent.

These conclusions reflect patterns within exploratory samples and should not be treated as nationally representative estimates.

ANNEXES

YJ4SD | Exploratory study on Gen Alpha in Romania, Poland, and Italy

Annexes

The questionnaire

AGE REQUIREMENT

This sociological study is exclusively aimed at Gen Alpha, therefore we only collect responses from those aged between 8 and 15 years old. How old are you? *[Enter only the whole number corresponding to your age]* Number less than or equal to 15:

INTERNET USE AND DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Q.1 ***How many hours do you spend on the Internet on a typical week-day (Monday to Friday)?*** *[Number of hours per day]*

Q.2 ***How many hours do you spend on the Internet on a weekend day?*** ***[Number of hours per day]*** *[Number of hours per day]*

Q.3 ***Do you have your own smartphone?***

- Q.3.1. Yes
- Q.3.2. No, and I almost never use a smartphone
- Q.3.3. No, but I often borrow a family member's smartphone
- Q.3.4. No, but I often borrow friends' smartphones

ONLINE TOPICS AND CONTENT

Q.4 ***Every day or almost every day, I use the Internet to:***
[You can choose more than one answer]

- Q.4.1. Do homework or study for tests
- Q.4.2. Learn new things not related to school (e.g., tutorials)
- Q.4.3. Search for information about my interests or hobbies
- Q.4.4. Listen to music or audiobooks
- Q.4.5. Watch movies, TV series, or videos
- Q.4.6. Play online video games
- Q.4.7. Chat or stay in contact with other people
- Q.4.8. Use social media

Q.4.9. Post on social media
Q.4.10. Use online store and auction websites
Q.4.11. Create online content (drawings, videos, music, etc.)
Q.4.12. Read news or articles
Q.4.13. Other:

Q.5 ***Which of the following do you use at least once a day?***
[You can choose more than one answer]
Q.5.1. Audio streaming (e.g., Spotify, Apple Music)
Q.5.2. Chatbots (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Character.AI)
Q.5.3. Discord
Q.5.4. Facebook
Q.5.5. Fortnite
Q.5.6. Instagram
Q.5.7. Instant messaging (e.g., Messenger, WhatsApp)
Q.5.8. Minecraft
Q.5.9. Pinterest
Q.5.10. Reddit
Q.5.11. Roblox
Q.5.12. Snapchat
Q.5.13. TikTok
Q.5.14. Twitter/X
Q.5.15. YouTube
Q.5.16. Other:

Q.6 ***Which topics interest you most online?***
[You can choose more than one answer]
Q.6.1. School (studying, homework)
Q.6.2. Relationships with others (friends, conversations, contacts)
Q.6.3. Health and well-being (self-care, feelings, mental health)
Q.6.4. Sports and physical activity (exercise, training, athletes, competitions)
Q.6.5. Fashion and appearance (clothes, styles, makeup)
Q.6.6. Nature, environment, and climate (animals, nature, climate change)

Q.6.7. Technology and artificial intelligence (new technologies, apps, AI)
Q.6.8. News (current events)
Q.6.9. Gaming (game news, streamers, e-sports)
Q.6.10. Music (bands, albums, concerts, fandom)
Q.6.11. Books (characters, reviews, fandom)
Q.6.12. Videos and online entertainment (movies, series, memes, humor)
Q.6.13. Other:

Q.7 ***What makes a post, video, or article interesting to you?***
[You can choose more than one answer]
Q.7.1. It is funny
Q.7.2. It is short and fast
Q.7.3. It has interesting graphics or editing
Q.7.4. It is about a topic I like
Q.7.5. It is emotional or moving
Q.7.6. I like the creator
Q.7.7. It helps me learn something
Q.7.8. It is surprising or unusual
Q.7.9. I don't know / I'm not sure
Q.7.10. Other:

Q.8 ***What usually motivates you to like, comment on, or share online content?*** *[You can choose more than one answer]*
Q.8.1. It is funny
Q.8.2. It is helpful
Q.8.3. It feels important
Q.8.4. I want my friends to see it
Q.8.5. I want to support the person who made it
Q.8.6. It makes me feel strong emotions
Q.8.7. I rarely do it
Q.8.8. Other:

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Q.9 ***Which source do you use most often to find out what is happening in the world?*** *[You can choose more than one answer]*

Q.9.1. TV
Q.9.2. Online news websites
Q.9.3. Social media
Q.9.4. Family
Q.9.5. Friends
Q.9.6. School
Q.9.7. Influencers or content creators
Q.9.8. Chatbots or AI tools

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

Q.10A ***In the past month, have you seen online content that you thought might be false or misleading?***

- Yes
- No
- I don't know / I don't remember

If "Yes" at Q.10A, apply Q.10B and Q.10C; otherwise, skip to Q.11.

Q.10B What did you do when you saw information that seemed false?
Q.10B.1. I ignored it
Q.10B.2. I unfollowed the creator
Q.10B.3. I checked it elsewhere
Q.10B.4. I reported it
Q.10B.5. I talked about it with someone
Q.10B.6. I did nothing
Q.10B.7. Other:
Q.11C.4. Their style changes
Q.11C.5. They post things I disagree with
Q.11C.6. I stop liking them
Q.11C.7. I rarely stop following creators

DESIRED CONTENT

Q.12. ***What types of content do you like most?***
[You can choose more than one answer]

- Q.12.1. Short videos (e.g., TikTok, Reels, Shorts)
- Q.12.2. Longer videos (e.g., YouTube 5+ minutes)
- Q.12.3. Memes
- Q.12.4. Stories
- Q.12.5. Livestreams
- Q.12.6. Photos with captions
- Q.12.7. Quizzes, polls, interactive content
- Q.12.8. Articles or longer texts
- Q.12.9. No preference
- Q.12.10. Other:

Q.13. ***What types of content should adults (teachers, creators, etc.) make for young people?*** *[You can choose more than one answer]*

- Q.13.1. Educational content
- Q.13.2. Content about young people's daily life
- Q.13.3. Funny or entertaining content
- Q.13.4. Content about emotions or mental health
- Q.13.5. Content about friendships and relationships
- Q.13.6. News explained in a simple way
- Q.13.7. Environmental/climate topics
- Q.13.8. Content about culture and entertainment (e.g., books, movies, concerts)
- Q.13.9. Other:

Q14. ***PARENTAL CONTROL***

- EXTRA 1 *Do you need your parents' permission to download or install apps?*
  - EXTRA 1.1. Yes, always
  - EXTRA 1.2. Sometimes
  - EXTRA 1.3. No

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Q.18. What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other:

Q.19. Place of residence

- Rural area
- Urban area

Statistical explanations

Sample weighting procedure

The quantitative dataset includes 1,717 valid responses collected through an online questionnaire (CAWI) in three countries: Poland (1,249 cases), Romania (257 cases), and Italy (211 cases). This distribution reflects the way the survey was disseminated through school networks and online channels rather than a planned sampling design.

As a result, the sample is strongly imbalanced across countries. Poland represents 72.7% of the total responses, while Romania accounts for 15.0% and Italy for 12.3%. If the data were analysed without any adjustment, the results of the pooled analyses would largely reflect the patterns observed in the Polish sample simply because it is much larger.

To reduce this imbalance and allow a more meaningful comparison between countries, we applied a weighting procedure in the pooled dataset. The goal of this adjustment was not to make the sample representative of the national populations, but to ensure that each country had a comparable influence in the comparative analyses.

The weighting strategy aimed to balance the contribution of each country so that the three national subsamples would contribute approximately equally to the overall analytical dataset. Given the total number

of responses (1,717), the balanced distribution corresponds to roughly 573 cases per country.

To achieve this balance, weights were calculated based on the ratio between the desired balanced number of cases and the observed number of responses in each country. In practice, this means that observations from Poland received smaller weights, while observations from Romania and Italy received proportionally larger weights.

After applying this adjustment, the effective analytical distribution of the pooled dataset became approximately balanced across the three countries: Romania (573 weighted cases), Poland (575 weighted cases), and Italy (572 weighted cases).

The weighting procedure was applied only in the pooled cross-country analyses, including descriptive comparisons and regression models. Analyses conducted within each country were performed using the original unweighted data.

It is important to stress that this adjustment does not make the data nationally representative. Its purpose is purely analytical: to reduce the influence of unequal sample sizes and to allow a more balanced interpretation of patterns observed across the three countries in this exploratory comparative study.

Technical Model Specification (Annex – For Specialists)

The final multivariate model was estimated using binary logistic regression, with civic_eng (0 = non-civic, 1 = civic-oriented) as the dependent variable.

Construction of Composite Indexes

Prior to model estimation, three composite indicators were constructed to capture structured digital orientations. These indexes were built based on conceptually related survey items and standardized for comparability.

Informational Orientation Index (Zcore_infos_index)

This index captures orientation toward informational and socially relevant content. It was constructed by aggregating items related to (Q4.1+Q4.2+Q4.3+Q4.12+Q6.8+Q7.7):

- interest in news and current events
- preference for educational or explanatory content
- selection of content perceived as "important" or "useful"

Items were first coded in a consistent directional format (higher values = stronger informational orientation). The composite score was then standardized (z-score transformation) to ensure comparability with other indexes and to allow interpretation of regression coefficients on a common scale.

Entertainment Orientation Index (Zentert_index)

This index reflects preference for entertaining, humorous, short-form, or highly engaging digital content. It was constructed using items capturing (Q4.4+Q4.5+Q4.6+Q6.9+Q6.5+Q6.10+Q6.12+Q7.1+Q7.2+Q7.3+Q7.5):

- preference for short videos
- interest in humorous or stylistically attractive content
- orientation toward entertainment-driven platforms or formats

Items were aggregated and standardized. Higher values indicate stronger entertainment orientation.

Digital Literacy Index (Zliteracy_index)

This index measures practices of verification and critical evaluation. It was constructed from items related to (Q10B.1 + Q10B.3 + Q10B.5 + Q10C3 + Q10C4 - Q10C1 - Q10C6):

- checking information in another source
- comparing multiple websites
- reporting misleading content
- assessing credibility

Items were coded so that higher values reflect stronger verification practices. The aggregated score was then standardized.

Standardization Procedure

All three composite indicators were transformed into z-scores:

$$Z = \frac{X - \mu}{\sigma}$$

This standardization ensures that coefficients in the logistic regression are comparable across predictors and that each index reflects deviation from the sample mean.

Full Model Specification

The logistic regression model included:

- Zcore_infos_index
- Zentert_index
- Zliteracy_index
- Age group (8–11 vs. 12–15)
- Country (Romania as reference; Poland and Italy as dummy variables)
- Gender
- Selected interaction terms (where theoretically justified)

The multivariate approach allows estimation of net effects by controlling for all predictors simultaneously.

Interpretation of Results

Results indicate that:

- Informational orientation and digital literacy are robust positive predictors of civic orientation.
- Entertainment orientation remains positively associated, though with smaller magnitude.
- The direct effect of age decreases when indexes are included, suggesting partial mediation.
- Country effects are less stable in the full model.

Pseudo R^2 values indicate moderate explanatory capacity, consistent with the multifactorial nature of civic engagement.

All analyses are based on exploratory samples; therefore, findings reflect internally consistent associations rather than population-level estimates.

Technical Interpretation (Annex – For Specialists)

After including the three standardized indexes simultaneously in the logistic regression model, their relative contributions can be evaluated net of socio-demographic controls.

Informational Orientation (Core Infos Index)

The informational index remains the strongest and most stable predictor in the full model ($p < .001$).

The odds ratio indicates that a one standard deviation increase in informational orientation substantially increases the likelihood of civic_eng = 1.

This effect remains robust after controlling for: age group, country, gender, entertainment orientation, digital literacy.

Substantively, informational practices constitute the primary structural pathway toward civic engagement.

Entertainment Orientation (Entert Index)

Entertainment orientation remains positively associated with civic engagement, although with smaller magnitude compared to informational orientation.

The positive coefficient suggests that high entertainment consumption does not crowd out civic orientation. Rather, it reflects an active digital engagement profile that may facilitate exposure to socially relevant content.

The effect size is moderate but statistically significant.

Digital Literacy (Literacy Index)

Digital literacy is also positively and significantly associated with civic engagement.

A one standard deviation increase in literacy increases the probability of civic engagement, though the magnitude is lower than that of informational orientation.

This suggests that verification practices and critical evaluation contribute to civic orientation but do not substitute for informational interest.

Mediation of Age Effect

The direct effect of age decreases in the full model, indicating partial mediation through informational orientation and literacy. Age appears to function as a proxy for developmental shifts in digital habits rather than as an independent determinant.

Pseudo R^2 values indicate moderate explanatory capacity, consistent with the multifactorial nature of civic engagement.

All estimates remain based on exploratory samples.

Technical Interpretation (Annex – For Specialists)

To assess structural heterogeneity, interaction terms were introduced between each standardized index and: Country (Romania as reference category), and Gender

Index × Country Interactions

Interaction terms between each index and country were included to test whether the magnitude of effects varies across national contexts. Results indicate:

The main effect of informational orientation remains positive and statistically significant across all countries.

Interaction terms are generally not robust across model specifications.

In certain specifications, literacy × country shows differential magnitude, but these effects are not consistently significant.

Entertainment × country interactions do not reveal systematic cross-national differentiation.

Overall, the explanatory structure appears relatively invariant across the three national contexts.

Given the exploratory design and initial imbalance in country distribution (prior to weighting), cross-national interaction effects should be interpreted cautiously.

Index × Gender Interactions

Interaction terms between each index and gender were also estimated. Findings indicate:

Informational orientation × gender is not statistically significant.

Entertainment × gender does not display consistent heterogeneity.

Literacy × gender reaches statistical significance in some model specifications, suggesting potential subgroup variation, but effect size remains moderate.

Substantively, gender does not structurally alter the explanatory model.

Observed interaction effects are limited in magnitude and stability.

All estimates remain conditional on exploratory sample characteristics.

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